
HELENA ROOKWOOD
ELM VINCE
A TRIAL OF THORNS
A COURT OF FAIRY TALES
BOOK TWO

A Trial of Thorns

A Court of Fairy Tales Book Two

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Thanks for reading
Also by Helena and Elm
About the authors

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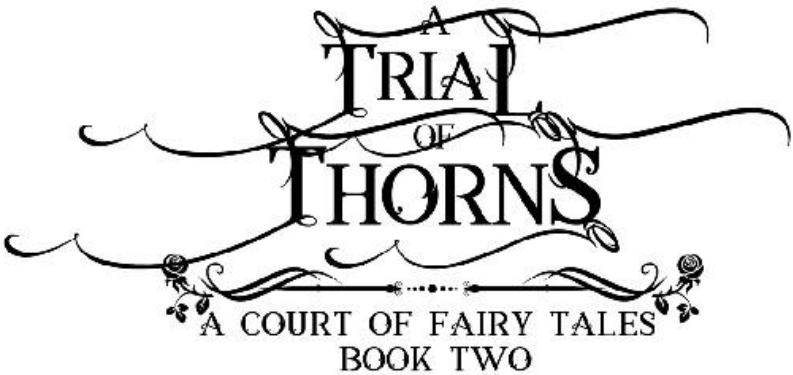
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HELENA ROOKWOOD AND ELM VINCE



The Courts of Faerie
and their heirs

Prince Badriyah
of the Desert Court

Their Highness Ren
of the Flower Court

The Alder Prince
Prince Thorne
of the Forest Court

Princess Neve
of the Frost Court

Princess Vanna
of the Metal Court

Prince Morven
of the Mountain Court

Princess Nerida
of the River Court

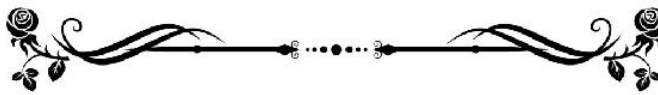
Princess Sereia
of the Sea Court

Prince Kage
of the Shadow Court

Prince Faolan
of the Sky Court



Chapter One



A BRIGHT LIGHT burned against my closed eyes, the velvety blackness around me slipping away. My lashes flickered slowly open, then shut again, the darkness closing back in.

No. I need to wake up.

I rolled onto my side, softness cradling me, soothing me as I took in my blurred surroundings. I was warm, in bed. Safe.

My eyes closed again, and a memory flashed to life.

Sky-blue eyes staring down at me. Golden flakes falling, sparking in the light, burning through my lungs.

I sat up with a jolt.

Where am I?

Rough hands grasped my arms, pulling me to my feet. I squinted against the blinding light, dizziness sweeping over me.

On either side, two pairs of hands gripped me tighter as I swayed. I wanted to turn and look, but my head wouldn't move. My bare arms tingled at the touch of the sunlight streaming in.

A hot flush prickled through my body, a sick, fluttering sensation building in my stomach. Everything was bright and glaring, a piercing white color instead of the dark, mottled greens of the forest.

My captors tugged me forward. I had no energy to resist.

A door creaked open, and the sharp morning sunlight flared brighter, clearing the mist in my mind a little. I blinked my dry eyes, trying to rid the blurriness at the edges of my vision, the speckled imprint of light that reminded me of pixie dust.

Pixie dust.

A memory stirred then disappeared, like a cloud passing the moon.

My head lolled forward, and I stared down at my feet as they tapped over a creamy marble floor, polished to a sheen and warm against my bare soles. I focused on that sensation as I tried to put together the pieces of where I'd woken.

It must be morning. I was inside. And as I frowned down at my legs, I realized I was dressed in clothing I'd never seen before, floating layers of blue organza shivering around my body, so soft and light it felt like I was wearing nothing at all.

“Where—?” I croaked, addressing my captors. I swallowed with difficulty, my mouth dry and a sour taste coating my tongue. “Where am I?”

The hands holding me tightened, but no reply came. With great effort, I turned to look at the people on either side of me. Human faces stared vacantly ahead, as if they hadn’t heard me—a tall woman with purple rings beneath her eyes, and a thin, square-jawed man. They both wore identical, limp tunics, the gray color of mushrooms.

I lifted my heavy head, dragging my gaze from the humans, higher.

Above us, the high corridor was open to the pale-blue sky. Sunlight streamed in, and I could make out slight shadows flitting around overhead, a glimmer of shining wings flashing behind each of them.

Fae.

My sluggish brain provided the word, accompanied by that same memory of glittering dust and cold, blue eyes.

My captors tugged me onward, and I stumbled, my gaze dropping from the fae fluttering above us.

The corridor opened up into a huge, luxurious room, decorated in hazy colors—creamy peaches, pinks, and blues—lined with marble pillars thicker than trees and glinting with touches of gold. The sharp smell of citrus lingered, cut through with the bitter aroma of over-brewed tea leaves. Winged Little Folk flew through the air bearing huge, golden trays laden with fruit and painted teapots.

What is this place?

“Welcome to the Sky Court, Aster.” A familiar voice echoed through the room, sending all the hairs on my body standing on end.

My gaze dropped to the large, circular table at the center of the room. Several Court Fae were seated around the edge, their eyes all pinned to me. I scanned their beautiful faces without recognition, settling on the fae who had spoken, the only one standing. A tall, elegant male with spun-gold hair and familiar blue eyes.

Faolan, my brain prompted, scattered thoughts of forests and curses and beasts narrowing to one pin-sharp memory.

Faolan stole me away.

He’d found me in the rose garden, told me he’d come to collect on the bargains I’d inadvertently agreed to, and then spirited me away from the forest.

A hot prickle edged down my spine as I clung to that moment. The only coherent recollection I had of why I was here.

He was dressed in his usual finery, a frothy, white shirt beneath a pale-blue, velvet jacket, his sun-kissed skin glowing in the light as a smile curved his lips.

“Please, sit.” Faolan indicated the chair opposite him, and my

human guards led me to it. My body was pliable in their hands, my limbs too lethargic to react, to pull away. I landed heavily in the gilded chair, and someone pushed it in behind me until the armrests touched the table edge, sealing me in. The chair had an odd open back that was uncomfortable against my shoulder blades.

"Aster, I'd like to introduce my family." Faolan made a sweeping gesture around the table. "My Uncle Azurel, and my cousins Raine, Dawnsong, and Cirrus."

The beautiful faces peered at me with polite interest, radiating a soft glow of light, just like Faolan. Each had a pair of wings tucked behind them, filling the gap in the backrest of their chairs.

"And this is my sister, Aurora." Faolan indicated the fae female sitting beside me last.

She inclined her head politely, her peach-gold hair, the color of a sunrise, pouring over one shoulder. Her blue eyes were a shade paler than Faolan's, and unlike her brother, whose golden wings were sheer, her paper-thin, white wings looked like a butterfly's.

She nudged one of the plates closer to me. "Please, help yourself to breakfast. You must be starving."

I'd eaten like this with Faolan before…hadn't I? A vague memory surfaced of another table, at another Court. For some reason, the taste of faerie wine swelled rich and sweet at the back of my mouth.

I attempted to focus on the golden dish closest to me, heaped with colorful fruits. Some I recognized—apples, damsons, blackberries—but others I'd never seen before. Or at least, I thought I hadn't. My thoughts were still scattered, like leaves on a breeze.

The hot, sick feeling in my stomach gave a twist.

"H-how long have I…?" I stuttered, still not moving to touch the food.

"You've been asleep for two months," Faolan replied politely.

My body slumped back in the chair, feeling ten times heavier.

Two months? Impossible...

It seemed like no time at all since my last, dust-addled memory of the Folkwood. Whatever dreamless dark had filled my time between now and then had given no indication so much time had passed.

A gaggle of tiny faeries bearing a huge teapot hovered in the air before me, tilting the pot forward so that fragrant, steaming liquid sloshed into my cup. One of them dropped to my hand, attempting to lift my fingers from the table and heave them toward the teacup before giving up and fluttering back to the others with a cross, indecipherable chattering sound.

Faolan looked around at his family. "Now that our guest has joined us, let us eat." They all leaned forward, the sounds of clattering silverware and tinkling glass filling the room.

It sounded so normal. But nothing about this breakfast was normal.

Slowly, I reached for my cup, pinching the cool handle between my finger and thumb. None of this made any sense.

"Why?" The word slipped from my lips in an exhale.

All of my questions were gathered in that one word. Why had Faolan betrayed me? Why had he brought me here, to the Sky Court? Why was he treating me like a guest when he'd kept me in an enchanted sleep for months?

Faolan just smiled at me magnanimously.

I sat up a little straighter, more memories swirling through my mind. Racing through the forest to make it to the Tithe. Arriving at the Cursed Court. Invisible servants, growing the roses, a faerie revel, learning to enchant, the fight with Yvette. Finally breaking the curse on…

Thorne.

His name rang through me like birdsong in the forest. A fist clenched my heart.

Faolan had stolen me from Thorne as soon as I'd broken the curse.

"Where's Thorne?" I demanded, my voice a little stronger.

Faolan's wings twitched behind him. "Right now? I have no idea." His lips curled into a cold smile. "I've not seen him these past two months."

"H-he doesn't know you took me?"

"I went to great lengths to ensure he didn't," Faolan replied mildly.

My fingers slid around my cup, the tea burning me through the delicate china. Disappointment swelled my chest. "So he doesn't know I'm here."

"If he did, we certainly would have been paid a visit by now."

I glared across the table at the shining, golden fae, heat spreading through my body, sweat dampening the backs of my knees. In the distance, music started up, a dreamlike flurry of notes from a harp and a chorus of high-pitched voices.

What had Thorne thought when he'd awoken to find all traces of me gone? Did he think I'd returned home to Rosehill? I was certain he'd have searched for me, but two months was a long time to be missing.

A chill ran through me. What if he'd given up?

I bit my lip as I stared around the table, the polite, beautiful faces of the Sky Court royal family looking back at me with attentive smiles and cold, shrewd eyes.

"Why do this to Thorne?" I demanded. "You said you were friends."

"We were. A long time ago." Faolan paused, his gaze drifting to his sister beside me. "Aurora, won't you serve Aster some food? She seems

unable to do so herself."

I swallowed hard, meaning to tell him I wasn't hungry, but Aurora already had my plate in her hand, piling it high with delicacies.

I set down my teacup. "I thought… I thought *we* were friends." I winced, some of the fire going out of my words as I recalled all the times Faolan had helped me at the Cursed Court.

He'd chatted to me about Faerie, assisted me with my gardening work where he could… He'd saved my life when the kelpie had attacked me out on the lake.

He gave a slight shrug of his shoulders. "I told you the first time we met that you shouldn't trust any of the fae."

That was true. And I'd known it, anyway, something any child of Rosehill could have told you. Yet I'd let my guard down for Faolan. Despite all my greenwitch training, I'd let him win me over with his polite manners and kind words. Just because I'd felt so alone in the Cursed Court.

Only for him to shower me in pixie dust and steal me away.

My hands shook with anger as I gripped the edge of the marble table. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Ah, that. I'm glad you asked, Aster." Faolan replaced his spoon on the table, dabbing at the corners of his mouth with a crisp, white napkin. "Do you remember what I told you in the Folkwood just before you came here?"

My memories were still hazy, but those last moments, when Faolan had betrayed me, were clear.

"You told me I owed you."

Faolan's eyes sparkled. "That is correct."

Aurora placed the plate of food gently in front of me. I bit my lip, clasping my shaking hands in my lap. I wanted to knock the plate to the floor, to scream at Faolan, but it seemed like he was about to tell me what I wanted to know.

"What do you know of the Alder Trials, Aster?" Faolan's singsong voice was light.

The Alder Trials. The words sounded familiar, but I couldn't remember where I'd heard them before…

"I know of the Alder King," I said hesitantly. "That he rules the Kingdom of Faerie." *And Thorne is his son, the Alder Prince.*

A rush of lightheadedness overtook me, and I squeezed my eyes closed, clutching at the arms of my chair.

"If you eat, it will help you think more clearly," a low, female voice murmured close to my ear. I opened my eyes, glancing to my right, but Aurora appeared to be sitting perfectly upright, sipping from a goblet.

I fumbled for the fork in front of me, my hands still trembling. My

plate was filled with tiny, roast birds no larger than my little finger, thin slices of bread toasted gold and dotted with currants, pale squares of cheese veined with crimson. After so long unconscious from magic, I knew I needed to eat, but the hot nausea in my stomach made everything on my plate look unappealing.

I poked around and found slices of fruit, drizzled with what looked like honey. I put a forkful in my mouth, chewing slowly.

"The Alder Trials happen once every two hundred and fifty years," Faolan explained. "It's how we decide who will become the Kingdom of Faerie's next Alder King or Queen. Each time the Trials take place, they're hosted by a different Court. This cycle, the Sky Court has the honor of hosting."

Faolan appraised me from across the table, his long fingers steepled.

"The rules state that each Court must send an heir to compete—a champion. They participate in a series of challenges. If they succeed, they win the Alder Crown." He paused, studying me as I washed the mouthful of food down with a gulp of now-lukewarm tea.

Aurora was right. The moment the food hit my stomach, it settled the sickness, sharpening my senses and clearing the fuzziness a little.

"Good," Faolan observed. "We need your strength back for when the other Courts arrive. You have a week to recover before the opening ceremony where you'll meet the nine champions."

I set down my cup. "Nine champions? I thought there were ten Courts."

"So you remember our afternoon in the library, then? It was a most memorable afternoon for me too." Faolan flashed me a winning smile. "Now, do you recall what else I said when I showed you the map of the kingdom?"

I clenched my jaw, coldness building in my core.

"I told you that the fae draw their magic from the land and that their magic is linked to their Court. Because of that, the host Court would hold an advantage if they were allowed to compete in the Alder Trials themselves. That is why there's an amendment to the rules."

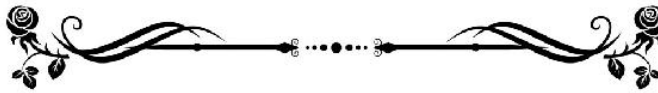
A chill crawled up my arms, and my heart quickened. I could feel the eyes of the other fae at the table on me, hanging on to Faolan's every word.

"The host Court must select a champion from outside their lands to enter the Alder Trials on their behalf."

He can't mean…

"You will be my champion, Aster." Faolan's face was serious now, all guise of smiling politeness gone. "You owe me three favors, and you will pay them by competing in the Alder Trials on behalf of the Sky Court."

Chapter Two



THE REST of breakfast passed in a blur, with Faolan refusing to elaborate on what, exactly, he meant by announcing that I was to be his champion in the Alder Trials.

I ate and drank to clear my head, the lethargy leaving my body with each bite. I chewed in silence, not taking in any of the polite murmur of conversation of the Sky Court.

How could I stand a chance against *Court Fae*, whatever these challenges were? I couldn't understand what Faolan was thinking, why he would ever think that naming me the Sky Court's champion was a good idea. Even with my enchanting magic, I didn't see how I could possibly win against any fae, let alone the heirs to the Fae Courts... It was a death sentence.

Unless that was the whole point. But there were easier ways to kill me.

"If you're finished, Aster, I'd like to show you more of the Sky Court." The sky prince smoothed down his tan pants as he stood, then walked around the table to pull out my chair. The other Court Fae who had been watching me from the corners of their eyes all jolted to their feet, but I remained stubbornly seated.

Faolan tugged sharply at the back of my chair. "If you're feeling better, perhaps I might be able to answer some of your questions."

My lips thinned, but I slowly rose.

I *did* need Faolan to answer my questions...but, silver bells, I hated that it would be on his terms. Not to mention he'd worded it in such a carefully vague way. In such a *fae* way. Who knew how much, exactly, he would tell me...yet what choice did I have other than to try to find out more?

I was steady on my feet as I walked alongside Faolan, uncomfortably reminded of all the times I'd walked with him in the Cursed Court, my arm linked through his, basking in his sunshine. I'd been so blind not to see through his golden charms.

But I wouldn't let the same happen now, no matter how beautiful his Court or how polite his manners. He'd tricked me, trapped me, and was forcing me into some fae games on his behalf, all for reasons I still

couldn't fathom.

"That was just one of our many breakfast rooms," he announced the moment we'd left the others behind us. We turned down a winding corridor, the white marble gleaming in faelight cast from the tiny sprites dancing along the corridors. Unlike in the Cursed Court, these Little Folk shone gold, not green.

The double doors lining the hallway were so tall I had to tilt my neck back to see where they ended. Many had been left open, and Faolan stopped at each one to show me the impossibly beautiful music rooms, libraries, parlors, and ballrooms beyond.

Despite everything, the airy opulence took my breath away. Above us, ceilings melted into skies and clouds, and winged Folk swooped high above our heads, fluttering from room to room.

I made no comment, absorbing the otherworldly beauty in silence, then stopped walking. "I don't want a tour, Faolan." I blew out a breath, my hands fisting in the unfamiliar material of my floating, blue skirts. "I want *answers*. You can't just announce I'm going to be your champion in some fae games and expect me not to ask more about it."

Faolan just took my elbow and guided me to the side of the corridor, glancing around. "You struck three bargains with me, and I'm making it simple to repay them." His voice was low and silky. "I've told you exactly what they're worth to me. Your participation in three of the Alder Trials, representing the Sky Court. The winners from each Trial go through to the next. And the winner of the final Trial becomes the Alder Heir, in line to become the next Alder King or Queen. I'd like to see the next Alder King seated in the Sky Court, Aster."

I pulled my arm away from him. I knew Faolan couldn't lie, but I doubted he was telling me everything. "You make it sound so simple. But a human competing against fae—"

"You're not just *any* human, Aster." He gave me a charming smile. "You're an enchantress. A breaker of curses."

My lips pursed. Faolan was right; I did have power of my own. But I was no longer in the Folkwood, and my power relied on plants. I was yet to see one sprig of greenery as we walked around the Sky Court...

He began walking again, slowly, and I followed him. "Are humans even allowed to compete for the fae throne?"

"The rules say the host Court must nominate a champion outside of their lands. There are no further specifications."

"And how do these Trials work?" I asked. "What if I don't make it past the first one?"

Faolan's eyes clouded over, the blue darkening. "You owe me *three* favors. If you don't make it past the first Trial, I will still have two

bargains to collect on. Of course," his tone lightened, "if you die in the first Trial, then that's another matter. You're free."

My steps faltered, my heartbeat ratcheting up a notch. *If I die?* "We have very different definitions of being free."

I fell silent as we stepped out into a large hall, dozens of alabaster balconies jutting out above our heads.

"I'll need to fly you to your chambers from here." Faolan offered his arm.

I glanced around. There were no staircases to be seen, no obvious doorways leading out of the grand maze of rooms. The only way out seemed to be up into the sky.

"All of the Court Fae here have wings," Faolan explained when I hesitated, "so the Sky Court is built to accommodate that means of travel."

Heat flared in my stomach as I stared at his proffered arm. The last time Faolan had flown me anywhere, he hadn't given me much choice.

Even now, that choice was just an illusion.

"Fine." My palm brushed against his velvet sleeve, setting my teeth on edge.

He moved around to sweep me into his arms, just as he'd done before, when he'd stolen me away from the Cursed Court. His warm, glowing body couldn't quell the goosebumps that rose in an icy rush across my skin.

A soft buzz emanated from his blurred wings as we spun and rose into the air. His grasp was gentle, the motion slow and controlled, but my stomach lurched anyway. I tried to ignore the marble floor growing smaller and instead focused on what was level with us.

The higher we climbed, the more luxurious the rooms appeared. Fine paintings came into view, depicting perfect, winged fae. Gold leaf laced the tops of the columns, and above them, thick, gilt mirrors reflected the light as well as the unsettling image of myself in Faolan's arms.

My skin was pale, my dark hair a tangle over one shoulder.

Being this high off the ground brought back some of the dizziness from earlier, and my palms grew damp. But despite my bodily reaction, I tried not to close my eyes, to take in my surroundings as best I could. I needed to look if I ever hoped to escape.

If I even could escape this place… I chewed my lip. The Sky Court was built for winged fae, and without question, that would hinder me. How could I explore by myself if I had to be escorted everywhere by one of my enemies?

As Faolan flew us higher, thin wisps of cloud rippled over my skin, water droplets condensing on my eyelashes. All of the fae flying in the

hall paused and hovered as we passed them, eager eyes watching their prince cradling me in his arms.

Faolan ignored the stares, although I couldn't help noticing how he turned slightly so each fae could get a good look at me, leaving hushed whispers echoing in our wake.

Of course, there was one other way I might still get out of here...

"What about Thorne?" I asked suddenly, and Faolan's body tensed slightly beneath mine. "You said the other Courts will be arriving in a few days. He's the heir to the Forest Court, isn't he?"

My heart strained against my chest at the thought of seeing Thorne again. He could shadow us away. He would know how to get me out of the bargains that bound me to Faolan.

"When the summons went out for the Trials earlier this year, Thorne was still cursed. His younger brother Ferne replied—he was the heir to the Forest Court while Thorne was banished."

Disappointment stuck in my throat. "But Thorne's no longer cursed."

"No, he is not." Faolan's voice was tight. "You saw to that. But just because he's the rightful heir, it doesn't mean he'll be rushing back to his duties at the Forest Court." His tone soured. "Historically, Thorne has never been one to embrace responsibility. He'd much rather cavort around with his friends."

If Thorne wasn't attending the Alder Trials, he would have no other reason to come to the Sky Court. He had no idea I was here.

I was going to have to get out of here on my own.

We landed lightly on yet another beautiful balcony, and I slid eagerly from Faolan's hot arms, glad to have firm ground beneath my feet and some distance from the shining fae.

Beyond, the balcony melted into vast chambers, easily five times the size of my rooms at the Cursed Court.

Faolan's amused voice rang out from behind me. "Welcome to your chambers, Aster, breaker of curses."

I'm not your guest, Faolan, betrayer of trusts.

I bit my tongue, my gaze skimming the room.

The huge, canopied bed, numerous closets, and ornate vase of flowers atop a dressing table couldn't stop the space from feeling empty. There were no windows, I noticed. The morning light spilled in through the balcony we'd landed on, and a fire crackled in a golden hearth on the far side of the room.

I glanced up. Unlike the dining room and the halls, the room had an actual ceiling, painted to look like a dreamlike sky. Tiny, winged Little Folk wielding white feathers dusted a huge chandelier that dripped with clear, sparkling stones.

If this was the same place I'd woken earlier, I didn't recognize it.

“All this is yours during your stay,” Faolan announced, his voice echoing slightly as he stepped into the room. He stalked past towering marble pillars and halted beside the closets lining the walls, pulling back the cream doors to reveal a pastel rainbow of soft, floating materials. “All of these gowns are the height of Sky Court fashion.” He pulled out dresses in dawn peach, sky blue, and dusky purple, the fabrics light as air.

I clamped my lips closed. If he was expecting gratitude…

A flicker of irritation ran over his perfect features when I didn’t respond. But before he could say any more, a knock sounded from somewhere across the room.

“Yes?” Faolan called out.

A door I hadn’t noticed opened inward.

So there is another way in.

“Ah.” Faolan looked pleased at the timing of the intrusion. “Aster, let me introduce you to your servants. They’ll cater to your every whim while you’re with us.”

Two young girls edged into the room, dressed in drab, gray tunics. Their eyes were distant, cast down toward the floor. Their humanness looked utterly out of place in a room as grand as this.

“Prepare your new mistress’s bed.” Faolan flicked an arm toward the huge bed. “She’ll still need more rest to recover from the pixie dust.”

Without replying, they moved slowly in the direction he’d pointed.

Something protective rose in my chest. Their age and looks reminded me of my sisters—one with flaming red hair, and one with smooth, dark skin—and I found I wanted to run and stand between them and the sky prince.

“Wait,” I said quickly. “What’re your names?” I hated how strained my voice sounded, memories of my sisters and Rosehill rising to the surface of my mind in a rush of emotion.

They paused, looking slowly between Faolan and me.

He studied his nails. “That hardly matters.”

I crossed my arms. “You asked them to cater to my every whim, didn’t you?” I looked back at the servant girls, wondering why they weren’t reacting to this at all, neither of them looking shocked or embarrassed by the way I addressed the fae prince. “I want to know their names.”

The girls continued to look blankly ahead.

“Your names?” I prompted again, a frown etching a line down my forehead.

After a few moments, the pale, redheaded girl spoke, her voice flat. “Bethel.”

“Mariyad,” the taller, dark-haired girl whispered, her name

sounding like a question on her lips.

Were they pixie-led? Under the influence of faerie fruit? What was wrong with them? As a greenwitch, I couldn't stop the questions, couldn't prevent myself from assessing the way they moved, the way they acted, trying to figure out what was wrong.

I wanted to *help* them.

The girls ambled toward the bed as if in a daze, parting as they moved around me. After a few seconds, they began fluffing the pillows on the bed, pulling back white sheets studded with pearls and fetching a gleaming metal pan from the fire.

"Look, Aster." Faolan stepped forward and took both my hands in his. I raised my gaze from his smooth, glowing palms to his face, his eyes widening in an earnest expression. "I want you to be comfortable here. That's why I'm offering you these clothes, the servants, this room. I want you to feel like my guest."

"As opposed to your prisoner, you mean." I pulled my hands from his grip, my expression hardening. "And if I refuse to be your champion?"

A cold look flashed across Faolan's face, sharpening his beauty like a whetstone.

"I don't care who sits on the fae throne." I spread my arms. "Why should I risk my life for you?"

Faolan interlaced his fingers at his chest. "I don't think you quite understand how faerie bargains work, Aster. If you don't fulfill your end of our deal, the fae magic binding us allows me to take something from you that I deem to be of equal value."

Dread coiled in my gut.

He stepped closer, and I tried not to flinch as he whispered in my ear. "Years off your life, perhaps? Your talents as a greenwitch?" He moved around me, his hot breath grazing the shell of my ear, then the nape of my neck. "That beautiful lilac color of your eyes? Your voice? Your firstborn child?" He circled around me until he stood before me again, tilting my chin higher with his knuckle. "Perhaps your memories of Thorne…"

My breath hitched as I took a step back, away from him.

"You can't…" I began, but the words died in my throat. Fae couldn't lie. He couldn't say it if it weren't true.

"This is not the Cursed Court, Aster." The sky prince's voice was still low. He dusted invisible fluff from his velvet jacket, the satisfied expression on his face telling me he knew he'd won. "And I am not Thorne, enticed by a pretty human face."

Faolan walked over to the dressing table, plucking a white morning glory flower from a vase. "If you turn down my *generous* offer, you won't get a say in what I choose to take. But if you take part

in these three Trials, then our bargains will be fulfilled."

I balled my trembling hands into fists at my side. "I have to win you the fae crown?"

He shook his head. "Our bargains are for you to compete in the three Trials, that's all." He spun the stem of the flower between his fingers. "Although I hope you'll win."

So I only had to make it through the first two Trials to compete in the third, and our deal would be done…

Faolan was banking on the fact that his threats had cowed me. I might not be able to run from the Sky Court in case Faolan claimed what he *deemed to be of equal value,* but maybe I could find another way out of these fae bargains that didn't involve being slain in a fae tournament. There must be *something* in a palace as huge as the Sky Court that could tell me how.

"Fine. I'll do it," I said, glad that, unlike Faolan, I could lie.

A shiver crawled up my neck as Faolan leaned forward, brushed away my hair, and tucked the flower behind my ear. "I knew you'd come around."

He moved toward the balcony, then paused, calling out to the servants.

The girls turned to him, their gazes still distant.

"When you're finished with your duties in here, put Aster to bed and be sure to lock the door behind you," Faolan instructed. "She needs to rest…and I don't want our guest disappearing on me."

He turned to me with a cold smile. "You're my champion, but that doesn't mean I trust you." He swept into a low bow, his golden wings flitting to life behind him, before disappearing over the balcony edge.



I paced across my new chambers. The servants had refused to leave until I'd agreed to get into bed as Faolan had commanded, although they hadn't seemed to care or even notice that I'd immediately gotten out again. And in spite of my pleas, they'd locked the door behind them when they'd left, some hours ago now.

I spun on my heel, striding back in the other direction, my feet sinking into the thick, soft rug across the floor. How was I back in this situation again? Taken, against my will, to a Fae Court?

I glared at the balcony Faolan had leaped from, cursing his home for being so inaccessible to anyone without wings. In the Cursed Court, escape into the Folkwood had been dangerous enough, but escaping over the balcony was impossible. And I'd never find a way out of these bargains stuck in this room by myself.

I halted in front of the locked door. This was the only possible way

out of here. I sighed through my nose. At least Thorne had never kept me under lock and key.

I knew what I *should* do right now. My mentor, Sage, would have told me to take a breath, to set aside my emotions and assess the situation...but that was impossible.

I was upset every time I thought about Thorne, who had no idea where I was or why I'd disappeared. I was *furious* when I considered Faolan and his folkdamned faerie bargains.

I sank back down onto the bed, unclenching my fists as I stared across at the door, sorting through my thoughts. Faolan had explained what he wanted from me, but I was still left with questions. At least now the fuzziness in my head had receded completely.

Back in the Folkwood, the sky prince told me he had his own interest in Thorne's curse remaining unbroken. But why?

And when had he decided to trick me into these faerie bargains? Had that been his plan from the moment he had saved me from the kelpie?

Silver bells, why enter a human in these fae games, anyway? Whatever they involved, if they were difficult for fae, they'd be impossible for a human. How could he possibly think I'd win against nine bloodthirsty, magical princes and princesses from around the Kingdom of Faerie?

I stood suddenly, realizing what Faolan had overlooked.

He'd reassured me that I'd be able to hold my own in the Alder Trials because I was an enchantress.

And that was just what was going to get me out of here now...

I stalked across the room to the vase of morning glory flowers, their white, funnel-shaped blooms splayed open to catch the light.

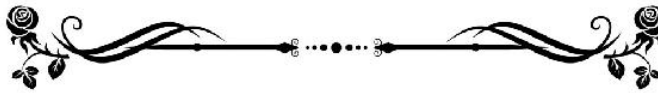
A smile curled the corner of my lips as I slid one of the wet, narrow stems from the vase.

Morning glory flowers *opened* every morning in the sunlight. Properties I could channel with my magic.

I began knotting the vine-like stem, feeling my hands heat as I reached for my enchanting powers.

Faolan didn't know it, but he'd left me with a key.

Chapter Three



I MOVED SILENTLY through the corridors of the Sky Court, trying not to attract the attention of the Court Fae flitting overhead. I didn't want any of them reporting back to Faolan that his champion was roaming the halls.

The tremble worsened in my limbs as I stole around the palace, sweat beading on my forehead. Enchanting the flower to pick the lock had drained what little energy I'd regained from breakfast, and it turned out I wasn't good with heights...which was unfortunate, given that the Sky Court seemed to stretch endlessly into the skies, all high ceilings and sudden drops.

The center of the palace was hollow, making me think of a beehive, so that I could see straight across to rooms and corridors on the other side of the building, which was lined with shining white balconies. Everything was bathed in a haze of gold and pale peach, the light softening the gleaming marble. Slight figures flitted between the floors or darted from one side of the building to the other, their wings shimmering in the sunshine.

Of course, if you were a winged Sky Court fae, you didn't need stairways or bridges to get between the rooms…

But I had no choice but to face the labyrinth of narrow bridges dissecting the Sky Court as I sought out the rare stairwells. I needed to figure out how to break these bargains with Faolan somehow, and I guessed my best bet was to try to use an enchantment...and that meant finding a garden.

My lips pursed. I'd figured all I'd have to do was keep heading down, but even after what felt like hours of roaming the palace, I seemed no closer to getting out of here. The ornate staircases were few and far between and seemed to be more for decoration than practicality. No one used them, not even the servants, which made me wonder if I was missing something.

How are the other humans doing it?

My gaze swept the corridor. Farther along, a row of servants, each carrying armfuls of linens, moved along a narrow bridge linking this corridor to another. Even from this distance, I could make out their

rounded faces and ears, the soft bodies, the plain, mushroom-gray clothes.

I hurried toward them, stepping out onto the bridge with a lurch in my stomach, trying to ignore the drop on either side, the stone slippery beneath my feet.

"Excuse me," I said politely, addressing no one in particular.

The servants continued walking, as if they hadn't heard me. I frowned. I'd have expected *some* sort of response. My wobbling movement marked me as different from the humans moving dreamily, unthinkingly, over the bridge. Not to mention that I was garbed in Court Fae attire, still wearing the wispy, sky-blue dress. Yet not one servant had glanced in my direction.

I sucked in my lower lip. "Could someone please tell me how to get to the gardens?"

I was greeted with an eerie silence.

I reached out for the next person who passed me, my fingers grazing the material of his robes. "Excuse me—"

The boy didn't so much as flinch at my touch. There was no change in expression, no falter in his steps. He just carried on walking, his tunic slipping from my grasp, as though he hadn't heard me at all.

Uneasily, I acknowledged that perhaps he was under faerie ensorcellment.

That perhaps *all* of the servants here had been ensorcelled...

A prickling sensation crawled over my skin. While in the Cursed Court, I'd learned that other humans were taken in Tithes to serve in the other Fae Courts, the price of peace between fae and humans. But seeing what that looked like...

I paused a moment, watching the vacant-eyed servants drifting past me in either direction, then blew out a slow breath. None of them were going to be able to help me.

My legs trembling, I moved swiftly across the rest of the bridge, determinedly not looking down at the drop, and stepped into the corridor beyond.

A line of huge, windowless arches opened up to the outside. A faint breeze lifted my curls, beckoning me toward them. I took a few tentative steps forward, then slipped outside.

I stepped out onto a wide, gleaming patio, empty of plants. In spite of the sun, my breath fogged in the brisk air, goosebumps rising on my arms. It had been warm inside the Sky Court, despite the open ceilings, but out here it was freezing. *How?*

A shiver ran over my skin as I looked toward the low wall running the circumference of the patio. Based on what I had seen from the interior, there would be yet another drop, but I might be able to see a garden below...

I walked to the edge, pressing my palms against the cool, white stone, and gave myself a moment before looking down.

My stomach flipped, even as my brain took a few seconds to comprehend exactly what I was looking at.

Below, there was nothing. Only a sheer marble wall falling away to a layer of bright, white clouds soaking up the golden sunlight.

We're above the clouds?

My eyes snapped shut, my breath catching in my throat.

Even if I could somehow break my bargains with Faolan, there was no way to escape, no way out—

"What are you looking at?"

Letting out a high-pitched, strangled noise, I fell back from the patio's edge, my heart thudding in my chest as my fingers scrabbled for the wall again.

A fae with long, peach-gold hair appeared next to me, her white, lace-like wings fluttering slightly in the breeze as she rested her forearms against the low wall and leaned over.

Faolan's sister—Aurora.

Is she here to drag me back to my room?

I wet my lips, steadying my tone. "What is there to look at?"

Her head jerked back in my direction and her brow creased, her lips pulling into a long, thin line. Her eyes widened. "You're not—you weren't planning on—?"

"Jumping?" I let out a raw laugh, tingles still sparking along my spine, churning in my stomach. "I can hardly stand to look down." I swallowed, pressing down the rising panic. "You don't have to worry. Faolan's not going to lose his prisoner any time soon. At least, not this way."

Aurora's pale-blue eyes trailed over me. Their shade matched the sky above us perfectly.

"Did he send you to find me?" I asked.

Her brow furrowed more deeply. "No. But I take it that means you're not supposed to be out of your room…?"

I shook my head.

"Then what *were* you doing?" Her voice was light, almost musical.

I hesitated, unsure how to reply. I could hardly tell her I was looking for a way to break my bargains with Faolan. "I like plants," I muttered vaguely. "I thought I might see if I could find a garden. Only…it doesn't look like you have one…"

Aurora tilted her head to one side, surveying me for a moment. The gesture reminded me so much of Faolan. "My brother said you're a gardener."

My jaw tightened. I wasn't a *gardener*. I was a *greenwitch* and an *enchantress*. But perhaps the sky princess didn't know.

I gave a stiff nod of my head.

"We don't have traditional gardens," she said, "but I can show you where we grow things up here. In the glasshouses. Would you like to see them?"

I hesitated. Could this be some fae trick? Still, if there was even a slim chance I might find plants I could use in my enchantments and that might help me get out of Faolan's faerie bargains, then it was worth going to look...

I stared as Aurora tucked her shining hair back behind her pointed ears. From what I had seen of the other Court Fae, she wasn't particularly tall, but I still had to tilt my head back to meet her eyes. A light constellation of freckles danced over her nose, her skin giving off the same golden glow that Faolan's did. Swathed in floating materials of soft blues, pinks, and lilacs, everything about her screamed *fae*.

I chewed my lip. I had fallen for Faolan's charm when I'd first met him, too.

But Aurora wasn't…*charming*, like her brother.

"I'll have to take you back to your room straight afterward, of course," she added quickly.

I cast an unhappy look back inside the palace. "It's difficult to get around here. As a human. Where exactly are the glasshouses?"

"I'm afraid I don't know the way walking." Aurora took a step back from the low wall, one hand going to her sheet of peach-gold hair, her long, slender fingers tugging through the ends. "I'll have to fly us there."

My stomach turned again.

Silver bells. Being flown about the palace was getting old really, really quickly.

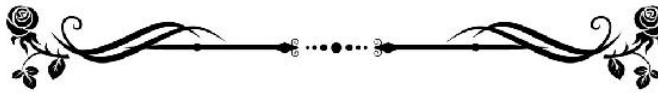
Still, if I wanted to see these glasshouses, what choice did I have?

Straightening up, I gave her a nod. "What do I have to—"

In a glittering flash, she was by my side, the scent of silk and honey washing over me as delicate, pinching fingers fastened around my waist.

My stomach lurched as she leaped us into the air, and the patio fell away beneath us.

Chapter Four



AURORA LANDED on yet another balcony with light, graceful steps, no different than if she'd descended a staircase. I thumped down beside her, my knees buckling.

I bent over, hands pressed against the top of my thighs, fighting down the nausea.

"This way." The sky princess's tinkling voice floated back as she began striding toward another arched doorway.

"Just...wait a moment." I held up one shaking hand.

She glanced back at me, her head tilting to one side again in a movement that reminded me uncomfortably of her brother.

Her brows knitted together in a puzzled expression. "What for?"

My eyes widened. Did she really not see that I was feeling queasy? I lifted a fist to my mouth and breathed slowly for a moment, then straightened. "I don't think I'm suited to flying..."

"Oh! You're unwell." Aurora returned to my side in another glimmer of sparkling light, her pale eyes searching mine. She raised a hand to my forehead, her palm hot against my clammy skin. "I saw a human nursemaid do this once. Does it help?"

I hesitated, then reached up to gently pry her hand from my head. "You don't need to do that," I said. "I'm not unwell. Just—the height makes me feel dizzy."

She considered this for a moment. "If you dislike being up high, that will make being here very difficult for you."

No kidding.

"Well, it's just through here..." Her voice brightened as she pushed open the doors and gestured through the archway.

I paused, then followed her through. The heat hit me instantly, a sticky, wet heaviness that curled around my shoulders and slid down my neck. I inhaled the misty, loamy scent of damp earth, laced with sharp sap and perfumed flowers.

I exhaled, my eyes fluttering closed for a moment, the sweet, brittle fragrance reminding me of my garden back in Rosehill, of working in the rose garden at the Cursed Court.

"The glasshouses," Aurora announced proudly, sweeping her hand

around to indicate the vast rooms before her.

I opened my eyes and my jaw dropped. This was unlike any glasshouse I'd seen in Rosehill. This was...*vast*.

I took a step forward. Unlike the rest of the Sky Court, and in spite of being made entirely of glass, the light was dimmer due to the plants stretching out above us, filtering the sunlight, woven into tangled knots of leaf and branch and twig.

I craned my neck back, gazing up to where the crowns of the tallest plants were too high for me to see. The canopies disappeared into a light, swirling mist that curled above us like the clouds I'd spied from the window earlier.

The hot, heavy scent of soil and plants settled into my chest, and a bead of sweat formed on my upper lip.

Aurora gave me a smug look. "Impressive, aren't they?"

I nodded dumbly.

"Well, we had to find *some* way of growing the plants up here. We're so high up, the air's thin. I believe there's some sort of faerie magic involved, but even just encasing the plants in glass seems to make them grow better." She caught herself, offering me an apologetic smile. "But of course, you're a gardener. Forgive me—you must know this already."

I nodded again, but my stomach twisted. As I moved closer, trailing my fingers through curling leaves and winding vines, the crushing realization that I didn't recognize any of these plants at all squeezed the breath from my lungs.

There was something different about these plants. The way they tumbled from balconies in strange curtains of lacy fronds. The way in which the vines seemed to curl and taste the air like tongues darting from mouths. Their tough, woody stems formed bumps and whorls and strange, swirling patterns I'd never seen before.

I wandered deeper into the dense glasshouse forest, turning my neck this way and that, hoping there might be even one plant that I knew, that I could use in my enchanting. I'd recognized the morning glory flowers in my bedroom this morning, after all. But there were none growing here, and no other plants or flowers I knew on sight.

Aurora fluttered along behind me, her wind-chime voice merrily chirping and cooing at the flowers we passed. "How beautiful they are!"

I shot her a weak smile over my shoulder.

"I don't come here nearly often enough. I suppose I think of this as the domain of the servants…" A stricken look passed over her face as those last words escaped her lips, her hands flying to her mouth. She hurried forward, gripping my floating sleeve with one hand. "Oh, please excuse me, Aster. I don't mean to speak of you as a servant, of

course. It's just—I don't think I've ever seen another one of the fae in here. It's the human servants who tend the plants." She lifted her hands, wiggling her fingers. "It takes Craft, you know. It's not *possible* for us to do anything useful here."

Of course.

And yet there were no servants in sight, no waiflike figures clad in mushroom-colored fabrics. My brow furrowed. I suspected the human servants were instructed to stay well out of the way of their fae masters within the Sky Court.

The panic in my stomach turned to anger. Not only were there no plants I could use here, but this whole folkdamned palace… In spite of its shining beauty, it was built upon the backbreaking labor of humans whose Craft the fae couldn't live without. Work that the fae certainly didn't appreciate.

Not if the way they treated their human servants was anything to go by.

I stopped walking and took a breath, trying to quell the rage stirring within me. My gaze found a purple-tinged flower, lilac-colored veins running up each petal. My fingers traced the unfamiliar bloom, soft as velvet.

I could worry about the human servants later. For now, *this* was my biggest problem.

Without knowing what any of these plants did, it was too risky to use them in any enchantment, let alone try to figure out one that might get me out of my bargains with Faolan.

That was one of the fundamental lessons I'd learned while training in the Cursed Court. Thorne had taught me it was essential to know the meaning of each plant before I used it. Getting it even slightly wrong could mean the enchantment had a vastly different effect than I was expecting.

Disappointment bit in my stomach as I acknowledged how unlikely it was that I would be able to use any of the plants in this glasshouse. And without enchanting, I had no idea how I would get out of the bargains I'd entered into with Faolan.

"Come on," Aurora said. "I want to show you something."

Reaching out and grabbing me by the hand, she dragged me through the glasshouses, in between tall trunks, winding stems, and bright flowers.

For a moment, I could've been back in the Folkwood, racing between the trees on the day of the Tithe, writhing briars, pale flowers poking out between the spring grasses as I flew toward Thorne.

I frowned, sniffing. A familiar smell saturated the air. One that made the blood rush to my ears, pound through my veins. It was the scent of honey, of desire.

The blood drained from my face.

I opened my eyes, knowing what I was about to see.

Aurora dragged me forward, out of the densely packed trees and onto a balcony where the sunlight streamed like butter onto a marble floor. Here, smaller trees had been planted in elaborate golden pots. These trees I *did* recognize.

The thick, cloying aroma was stronger here, the shining red fruits hanging from the branches plump and ripe.

Faerie fruit.

“These are the most prized plants in all of Faerie.” Aurora stopped beside one of the trees, running a long finger over the ruby-red skin of one of the fruits.

I forced a watery smile onto my face as sweat beaded on my brow, my palms growing damp.

“This is faerie fruit,” Aurora explained. She offered me a warm smile. “I’m told it has an irresistible effect on humans.”

“I’m aware of it,” I replied drily.

Echoes of the dinner I had attended with Thorne and Faolan back at the Cursed Court filled my mind. The revel…when faerie wine had been forced on me. I recalled the way it had made me lose control. The way my thoughts had turned slippery, my vision blurred. The swell of uncontainable emotion that had coursed through my body.

Satisfied that I’d had a good look at the fruit trees, Aurora drifted over to a low divan next to the glass wall and patted the seat beside her.

Without seeing what else I could do, I joined her.

Aurora fixed pale-blue eyes lined with thick, fluttering lashes upon me. Unlike Faolan, there was nothing cunning in her face, at least not that I could see. Her expression was curious, not cruel.

“Aster,” she said hesitantly, “it’s been a long time since I learned human customs, so forgive me if it's improper to ask...but is it true what Faolan said?” She shifted closer. “Is it true that you're the one who freed the Cursed Court?”

I didn't answer for a moment. I guessed this was why Aurora had agreed to bring me here in the first place. To satisfy her curiosity. But what did I gain by keeping it a secret? And if I were going to escape the Sky Court, I might need Aurora’s assistance again.

“Yes,” I said hesitantly. “I did.”

I gazed out of the glass at the endless blue skies. In the far distance, I could just make out the peaks of what must be a vast mountain range, capped with snow.

Aurora sat back abruptly. “Faolan was right, then,” she breathed slowly. “Human enchantment is more powerful than any of us knew.”

I winced. Aurora knew about enchanting?

Thorne had made it sound like such a big secret before. He'd told me that only the Forest Court knew about the enchanters. But I supposed it made sense that Faolan would tell his sister—she was the Sky Court princess, after all.

I took a shallow breath, trying to gauge Aurora's reaction to my confirming my enchantress abilities. "I had to use my enchantment while I was at the Cursed Court, but that wasn't what broke the curse."

She tilted her head to one side, reminding me of a bird, or one of the Little Folk.

Tears suddenly filled my eyes. "It was love," I whispered, a lump forming in my throat. "It was love that broke the curse. My love for —" I broke off, unable to continue speaking, and dropped my gaze to my lap.

I breathed heavily, trying to contain the emotion swelling in my chest. Thorne had always found a way to bring out the emotional part of me...even when he wasn't here, it seemed. Where was he now? How was I going to find my way back to him?

"Your love for Thorne?"

I flinched as Aurora reached out, a delicate hand fastening itself around my wrist. "You really fell in love with Thorne?" she asked again, her voice suddenly tightening. "You mean to say that it was possible—even though you're a human, you truly could love a fae?"

What an odd way of putting it... I lifted my gaze to hers, then nodded.

She sank back, her wings shivering. "I shouldn't believe you, except that you broke the curse. After almost a hundred years…" She shook her head. "Faolan said it wasn't possible…"

My lips pressed together. Was it so difficult for her to believe that a human might be capable of true love?

Her sharp eyes returned to mine. "And he fell in love with you?"

"I think so. Yes," I said more definitely. "It was only true love that could break the curse."

Aurora's hand slipped to mine, squeezing it tightly. "Then I should tell you," she breathed softly, "I've heard reports that Thorne has been searching for you."

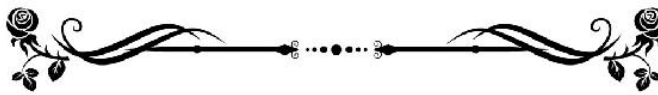
I lifted my hand to dash the tears from my lashes. "He has?" I'd known he wouldn't have given up on me, but to have it confirmed settled the churning in my stomach. "Do you think he might come here, for the Alder Trials?"

Aurora chewed her lip. "It's his duty to attend," she said slowly. "Now that you've freed him of his curse, he is the heir to the Forest Court. But if he's still looking for you and he has yet to return home...his brother will come in his stead."

A sinking feeling rushed through my body.

"Either way," Aurora said gently, "you'll find out next week. When the other Courts arrive."

Chapter Five



I SAT RIGIDLY on my throne, clutching the armrests so tightly that my knuckles turned white. All around me, the air was heavy, swimming with magic.

One by one, the heirs to the other Courts had arrived. I'd watched from the dais at the head of the throne room as they bid to outdo each other with their arrivals, banners and entourages sweeping in behind them like leaves carried on a strong wind. And yet there had been no sign of Thorne, or anyone from the Forest Court.

The fae heirs had the most spectacular outfits, crowns upon their heads that represented their kingdoms, and each wore strangely crafted rings that they had, upon arrival, tossed into an empty brass cauldron that sat before Faolan.

I could guess at which Courts were here from the map Faolan had shown me on the library ceiling in the Cursed Court. Djinn from the distant Desert Court had arrived in a spit of fire and guttering flames. Huge, hulking fae from the Mountain Court had arrived garbed in animal skins and crowns of antlers, some riding great black stags and others large wolves.

Sweat slipped down my spine as I recalled the hunt that had cornered me at the revel.

Still others had arrived in a curl of shadow and starlight from the Shadow Court, the darkest corner of all the Kingdom of Faerie.

All of them were stunning, their perfect skin radiant with an inhuman luminance. The air hummed with the strength of the gathered fae magic, the pressure on my human body a thousand times worse than it had felt any time Thorne had used his gifts in my presence.

Is he coming?

I shifted on my throne, uncomfortable in spite of the plump cushions arranged behind me. Like everywhere in the Sky Court, the throne room dripped with luxury. Floating banners in soft pastels, the colors of the dawn, drifted down the walls. The open ceiling was encased with a shining gold surround, casting the room in a warm glimmer. Bright flashes of gold caught around the room where Little

Folk flew pitchers of a steaming, spiced liquid to offer to the Court Fae.

I dropped my gaze as I felt the eyes of the huge Mountain Court heir trained upon me. As interested as I was in the fae, I knew they were interested in me too. To learn why a human girl was seated beside the heir to the Sky Court, overseeing all of them as they arrived, when the only other humans here were servants dressed in plain tunics, scurrying around out of sight.

I ignored every curious gaze, every fixed stare, every arched eyebrow.

Until Vanna appeared.

She arrived in her golden chariot, flying down through the open ceiling, followed by others dressed in similar metal garb.

I'd not seen Thorne's friend since the night of the Lúnasa revel, when she'd rescued me from Yvette and fought the Hunt to try to protect me. I knew she was from the Metal Court, but I'd had no idea she was the heir.

The metal princess was clad in glittering armor, gold paint dripping over her collarbones, down her arms, bright against her dark skin.

I sat up straighter, murmuring her name.

Faolan turned to me, his blue eyes hard. "Don't do anything stupid, Aster." He turned back to face Vanna with a smile.

She strode toward us, ignoring Faolan, her gaze fixed on me, confusion and anger warring on her face. I sat up straighter, trying to convey everything that had happened in a look. That, despite the fact I was sitting at Faolan's side, dressed in his colors, I didn't want to be here.

"What are you playing at, Faolan?" she snapped.

"That's not a very polite way to greet your host," Faolan replied. "I thought princesses were raised with better manners."

Vanna ignored him. "Why is Aster here?" Her gaze flicked to me, assessing. "Is she ensorcelled?"

"I'm not ensorcelled," I said quickly. "But—"

"She is not your concern, Vanna." Faolan cut me off, indicating the cauldron before him. "Now, are you here to fight me, or for the crown?"

At the sound of raised voices, the chatter of the room quieted, everyone turning to watch the exchange.

Vanna's jaw hardened. "We're not done, Faolan."

Then, as every heir had done before her, she tossed a ring from her finger into the cauldron.

As she turned away, I called after her, my voice fraught, "Is he coming?"

She froze, then twisted back to fix me with a long, hard stare. “I don’t know.”

Something caved in my chest.

Thorne was my only hope to stop all of this madness. Whatever faerie bargains Faolan thought he had tricked me into, Thorne would know a way out of them.

And even if there wasn't a loophole, well, I had seen Thorne lose his temper before. I had seen what power he was capable of. Even in his beast form, he had held his own against Faolan when they'd fought at the Lúnasa revel. If Thorne couldn’t win me back through words, I knew he would through force.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, fire surging through my veins. The same love that would drive him to fight for me was also the reason he’d forsake his place in the Trials.

To keep looking for me.

My head jerked up as a breath of freezing air suddenly bellowed into the room. I shivered, the cold wrapping itself around my shoulders, and squinted against splinters of blinding, sparkling light. Snowflakes flurried down from the skylight, falling from the clouds thick and fast. Shavings of ice, like pieces of a smashed mirror, whirled in a busy glitter.

I inhaled sharply through my chattering teeth as I realized this must be yet another of the Fae Courts arriving.

Sure enough, a female with long, white hair, skin so pale it was almost blue, and hard, bright eyes stepped out of the maelstrom. Snow lined her lashes, tiny, perfect flakes that clung to her without melting. Splinters of ice formed a formidable crown upon her brow. She looked fierce, frightening, terrible, and beautiful.

My gaze swept around the room again, counting the assembled fae, although I already knew how many Courts were here.

With the arrival of the Frost Court, that brought the total to nine. There was only the Forest Court left to arrive.

An array of equally dazzling, snow-white fae stepped out of the snowstorm after the frost heir.

The frost princess stalked forward, her billowing robes catching the light like the glare on ice. I caught my breath as she approached the thrones. Her eyes met mine, and I was struck with a cold so deep that ice seemed to spread through my veins, my heart slowing, goosebumps rising on my arms.

“Neve,” came a stiff voice from beside me. “Welcome. I hope you’ll be delighted by the Sky Court.”

She didn't give any acknowledgment she’d heard Faolan or tear her eyes from mine.

There was a pause while the rest of the fae stared in our direction,

a kind of wild eagerness hanging in the air as the frost heir—Neve—stepped closer, her gaze roving over me.

"And who might you be?" she purred.

Faolan cleared his throat loudly. "Dear, dear Neve. Are humans so highly esteemed in the Frost Court that they are greeted before fae royalty?"

Her eyes narrowed, the cold spear of her gaze directed at Faolan now, not me.

I let out a breath, the sunlight streaming in from up above us warming me again, as though I had stepped back into the Sky Court from some other realm.

Neve smiled thinly. "I see empty pleasantries are still very much in favor in the Sky Court," she snipped, wresting the ring from her finger.

She chucked it into the cauldron without so much as a glance, the clash of metal on metal ringing out, the sound reverberating around the room. Her eyes lingered on me a moment longer before she prowled back to join the rest of the frost fae. Ice had already spiderwebbed out from where they had gathered around a table, sipping the hot, spiced wine Faolan had organized for his guests.

I lifted one hand to my face, gnawing at my thumbnail. Nine Courts here, and only one left…

My heart rate climbed as I stared around the room of assembled fae. There was still a sense that they were waiting, that the ceremony had not concluded.

Unease churned in my belly. It seemed unlikely Faolan would be so calm now if he knew that Thorne was on his way. He knew Thorne's temper as well as I did.

Minutes crawled by, and still no heir from the Forest Court arrived. I'd thought that even if Thorne wasn't coming, his brother or another delegate would arrive in his stead. That I would at least be able to get a message to him somehow.

Faolan stood, rubbing his palms together. The chatter died as he spoke. "It seems the Forest Court will not be gracing us with their presence at these Trials, after all."

No.

Tears pricked at my eyes, panic rising in my chest.

Thorne wasn't coming, which meant I had to navigate these bargains alone. Escape was impossible from this palace in the clouds, and I didn't know how to use the plants here to enchant my way out of a fae bargain.

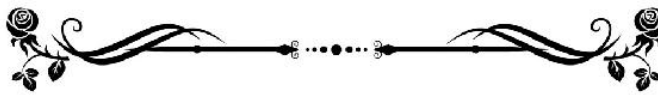
I would have to enter the Trials, and I had no doubt I'd be killed by one of these bloodthirsty heirs before ever paying off my debts to Faolan—

My wild thoughts were interrupted by a curl of smoke that appeared in the very center of the room.

My heart leaped. I didn't need to look to recognize that swell of magic tinged with the scent of smoke and rosewood.

Thorne.

Chapter Six



THORNE'S BROAD, elegant figure emerged before me, stepping out of the shadows, just as he had shadow walked the two of us so many times while I had been at the Cursed Court.

Unlike all of the other Courts, he arrived alone, no simpering courtiers or servants at his side. He stepped toward us, then stopped, still as stone, his eyes finding mine.

"Thorne!" I cried out.

I made as if to rise but suddenly found that I could not, a heavy, oppressive wind wrapping around my wrists and binding me to my chair. I looked to Faolan at my side, but the sky prince gave no sign he was using his magic on me.

"Don't make me ensorcel you into silence," he said under his breath, then stood, spreading his arms wide in greeting.

"Thorne, old friend. We thought you weren't coming."

Thorne looked slowly between Faolan and me, then gave the sky prince a cold smile that sent shivers down my spine. Shadows licked along the outline of his body as he strode toward Faolan, menace in every step. The pressure of magic in the air worsened, like a gathering storm. The room seemed to darken.

His eyes locked on mine. "Are you okay?"

All of the breath had left my lungs, Faolan's magic still pressing me into the throne. I managed a nod.

"Are you hurt?"

I shook my head, but a tear slid from the corner of my eye.

Ripping his gaze from mine, Thorne turned to Faolan. "Can I ask why Aster is sitting up there beside you, Sky Prince?" His voice was light, silky, but the pressure in the air intensified. "Much as I hate to threaten old *friends*, if you've harmed one hair on her head—"

"Really, Thorne, there's no need for such bestial threats," Faolan replied lightly. "Is that really the impression you want to make on the entire kingdom the first time they see you in your fae form after almost a century?" Titters ran through the room. "Aster has been my guest for the past two months. Although she spent most of that time...in bed." He made those final words sound purposefully sordid.

"*Sleeping*," I flared. "He took me from the rose garden."

Faolan smiled. "Aster had a run in with some *very* potent pixie dust."

A flicker of shock ran across Thorne's face, swiftly followed by that cold, contained fury. The throne room darkened further, ominous, gray clouds swirling above the open ceiling. The shadows I'd seen so many times before danced up around Thorne's shoulders, lifting from his body like smoke.

I stilled. I'd been so sure the shadows were part of his curse, like the tattoos. That the mist I had seen curling around him when he lost his temper was linked to his beast form.

"You stole her." Thorne's words were sharp as a blade. "You betrayed me."

He didn't ask why, and Faolan offered no explanation.

"You back-stabbing puck." Thorne held out a hand to me. "Aster leaves with me, *now*."

I tried to reach for him, but my limbs were still pinned to the arms of the throne.

"I'm afraid Aster is currently bound to the Sky Court. So she won't be going anywhere."

The anger in Thorne's eyes dimmed for the first time since he'd arrived, replaced with worry. "What do you mean, *bound*?"

"Faerie bargains," I answered before Faolan could. The color drained from Thorne's face, and my stomach twisted.

The golden prince shot me an openly irritated look before turning back to Thorne. "You know, you really should have kept better tabs on your Tithe humans, Thorne. You were always so careless with them. All those other girls wandering off into the woods. Then you lost the only one you managed to save…"

Eyes flashing, Thorne shadowed onto the dais, appearing right before Faolan. His fist bunched in Faolan's shirt, and he lifted the sky prince clean off of his throne as if Faolan weighed the same as a pixie.

"Now, now, Thorne." Faolan's wings flitted to life behind him, easing the pressure off of Thorne's hold. "Remember where you are. The whole kingdom is watching."

For the first time, my gaze found the rest of the room. The other Court Fae watched the fight between Thorne and Faolan with detached amusement, barely pausing in their drinking or eating to follow the drama.

Faolan smoothed a hand through his golden hair, composed despite still being in Thorne's clutches. "If you wish to abandon the opening ceremony to fight me, you can always forsake your place in the Trials. Resign as champion, and we can finish this outside right now."

Thorne released Faolan and took a step back. Thunder rumbled overhead, and Thorne's eyes flashed dangerously. I knew that look. He was considering it.

A slender hand gripped his arm. *Vanna.* She pulled him away from Faolan.

"Don't do it, Thorne. It's what he wants." Her words were low. "Think about it. Aster said she's bound here by faerie bargains. That magic is old and strong. If you stay here as a champion, at least you can stay close to her."

Thorne's shoulders lowered a fraction. He reached into his inner pocket, pulling out a ring and rolling it between his forefinger and thumb.

Faolan eyed it. "Once you drop that ring into the cauldron, you are bound by the magic of the Trials, same as the others. You cannot leave the Sky Court until they are over. And it would look very bad for a champion to harm the host of the Trials."

Thorne hesitated, shooting me a pained look, then stepped closer and dropped his ring into the cauldron with a metallic clang.

Vanna tugged him away from the dais toward the rest of the Metal Court at the edge of the room, still muttering hushed, firm words.

"Welcome to our Forest Court champion," Faolan said, his rich, buttery, sunshine voice ringing out, as if he hadn't just been threatened by Thorne.

I exhaled, feeling like I hadn't breathed the entire time Thorne had been standing before us.

The other fae seemed torn between staring at the most recent champion and looking back at Faolan. My eyes remained pinned to Thorne, and his returning gaze felt like a touch, burning my skin.

Now we were both tied to the Sky Court.

The excited swell of magic that had risen at Thorne's arrival grew wilder, more intense. I could almost taste it in the air, a metallic, sweet flavor like iron and honey. I could hear it, too, in the chime of curious voices as they whispered to one another.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I realized what the source of conflict was.

They wanted to look at Thorne after his dramatic entrance...but they also wanted to know whom the Sky Court would be entering into the Alder Trials. Whom Faolan's champion would be.

Anxiety knotted in my belly like tangled branches in a thicket.

I guessed they wouldn't have to wait much longer to find out.

I sank lower on the throne as Faolan smiled and got to his feet, clapping his hands together.

"Gentlefolk," he announced, a warm breeze carrying his voice around the hall, filling the huge space despite the open ceiling. "In

spite of the circumstances, it is good to all be together once more. Why, it must be almost a quarter millennium since we last met…"

There were a few isolated titters, which I suspected came from other members of the Sky Court.

Faolan plowed on nonetheless. "I invite you to treat my home as yours in the time that you are here. You have each been provided with rooms that I hope will be comfortable, and which will meet each of your...*unique* needs." His lips curved up. "Of course, those of you who cannot fly or transport yourself by means other than walking may find traveling around the Sky Court somewhat difficult."

The mood in the room swiftly turned dark, the magic crackling with an aggressive energy that hadn't been there moments before.

I supposed I should have been surprised it hadn't been quicker. These fae were here to compete for the crown, after all.

Faolan's smile grew broader, wolfish. "In particular, I ought to welcome the forest prince so newly returned to us. No doubt there are some of you who were unaware until now that Prince Thorne's time in the Cursed Court had ended so recently." His sky-blue eyes traveled across the room to where Thorne glowered, antagonism radiating from him in curls of shadow.

Faolan returned his attention to the rest of the room and extended an arm toward the brass cauldron. "Now that all of you have arrived and cast your tokens into the cauldron, you are all bound by the magic of the Alder Trials. These rules are absolute, upheld by the ancient faerie magic of the Trials. No champion may leave the Sky Court for the duration of the Trials. No champion may harm another *outside* of the Trials. And no champion may enter the rooms of another champion while they remain here. Now there remains only one Court left to do the same…" He placed his hand to his chest, a belligerent smile lighting his golden features. "As you're all well aware, as the host Court, we are expected to nominate a champion to compete on our behalf."

The air in the room grew impatient, bristling with unease. Several of the fae craned their necks, looking around the room, wondering from which Court Faolan would have selected his champion, no doubt looking for the biggest, most powerful fae, someone the Sky Court expected would be able to compete against the other heirs.

The knot in my stomach grew tighter. Faolan wasn't stupid. How could he expect me to compete against fae like these? Not just any fae, but Court Fae. And not even just any Court Fae—the strongest and most terrible of them all, the heirs to each Court.

Including *Thorne.*

"Well, allow me to put you out of your misery," Faolan announced. "Those who have bet on which Court I've selected a champion from

will soon have their questions answered."

I swallowed.

Faolan lifted his chin, and a hungry, wicked humor I'd never seen in his expression before stole into his eyes.

"Aster," he said smoothly, extending his hand to me. "Will you come here, please."

It wasn't a request. The strange wind that had been binding me to my chair urged me upward so that I took a stumbling step toward him, reaching out in an effort to keep myself from falling.

He caught my hand, and something cold and hard pressed into my palm.

Faolan's ring.

I stared down at it, the shining, golden metal in the cup of my hand thrumming with power, shaped like a tiny, twinkling sun.

A roar from Thorne sounded among the collective hissed intake of breath as the gathered fae realized why I had been sitting upon the dais beside Faolan. Not as a conquest, but as his champion.

The golden fae turned back to the room, a spider-like smile creeping across his face. "My champion comes from none of the Fae Courts," he said slowly. "My champion comes from the human lands…" He lifted a hand, trailing it down my dark hair, and I flinched back. "I think you will all be surprised by what Aster can do. Now, Aster, if you don't mind…" He gestured toward the cauldron.

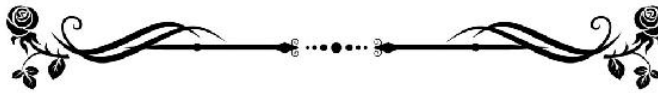
Once I dropped the token into the pot, I would be bound by the Trial rules, just like the others.

"Don't, Aster!" Thorne's voice rang out through the room. Vanna and several other members of the Metal Court restrained him, and he writhed in their grip.

But with my faerie bargains still in place with Faolan, I had no other option. And besides, Thorne was tied to the Sky Court for the Trials now. Neither of us could leave.

The whole room watched as I took a few halting steps forward and dropped the ring into the cauldron.

Chapter Seven



I PACED BACK and forth across my room, gnawing at my thumbnail. The last of the fire had burned out in the golden hearth, its glow replaced by a pale wash of morning light. The vase of flowers had been removed from my room, and not only were the doors firmly locked, but I could hear the low murmur of guards standing watch outside my door.

Now that Thorne was in the Court, Faolan wasn't taking any chances. Would he keep us apart until the first Trial?

I edged out onto the balcony, soft dawn light illuminating the airy halls of the Sky Court, and my throat tightened.

When Thorne had chosen me at the Tithe, I'd been wary of the enchanted mansion, the fae in the Folkwood, and the Beast who haunted our nightmares in Rosehill. But I'd grown up surrounded by the forest. I'd never felt claustrophobic in the Cursed Court.

Not like I felt here, in the wide openness of the Sky Court, with its high balconies, open ceilings, and sudden drops. And fae flying overhead like birds of prey.

I tiptoed to the edge of the balcony, then peered over, looking down at the grand hall. My stomach clenched, and my head swam. It was so high up I could barely see the floor.

I needed to find a way to Thorne, but escape this way was impossible. And Faolan had said that the Alder Trials rules meant that no champion could enter another's rooms...

No matter what the folkdamned rules said, I *had* to speak to Thorne before the Trials started. Seeing him so close yesterday…but not being able to go to him, to touch him… My heart ached just thinking about him. I had to speak with him and explain the bargains. We needed to come up with a plan now that we were both tied to these Trials.

A few Sky Court fae drifted past the balcony, their melodic voices dancing through the air, gossamer robes rippling behind them. I slipped back inside, pulling across the thin drapes before dropping back onto the bed, the cloud-like mattress impossibly soft beneath me. I rubbed my tired eyes.

I hadn't slept at all last night.

How could I?

It wasn't just my desire to see Thorne that kept me awake, but the faces of the other Court Fae who'd arrived for the Trials. They had been a blur of beauty, fine clothes, and sharp teeth. I shuddered as I thought of Neve, the frost princess who'd arrived just before Thorne, with her shimmering crown of icicles and the cold look in her eyes.

How was I supposed to compete with a fae like *her*?

Once again, I wondered why Faolan would enter me into these Trials to represent him.

My eyelids closed, tiredness burning the backs of my eyes.

A sleepless night probably hadn't increased my chances of keeping up with the other champions. I was a mortal, with human needs, while the fae… I had no idea if they even needed to sleep or eat to function.

I pushed the thoughts from my mind, restlessly tossing and turning on the bed as I slipped into a light doze.

A muffled bang sounded close by, followed by a scrabbling sound, like nails against stone.

I sat bolt upright, my gaze shooting to the doors.

Thorne?

But they didn't open.

I stood slowly, my silk skirts whispering against my legs as I padded barefoot across the room, my ears pricked for the sound, moving toward where it was loudest.

It sounded like it was *inside* the walls.

My pulse quickened, and, not for the first time since waking in this Court, I wished I had my iron knife with me. I gripped a candlestick instead and edged around the room, my body as tense as a bow string. I paused at the grand, golden mantelpiece surrounding the hearth.

Silence.

Was a sleepless night playing with my imagination?

Then a loud clatter and a cry split the air, and I lurched back as something dropped from the chimney in a cloud of dark dust.

"Stay back!" I cried out. "There are guards outside my door. If I call for them, they'll be here in seconds."

An assassin sent by one of the other champions? Dread coiled in my stomach, and I backed off rapidly, my feet slipping over the smooth floor.

A whistling cough emanated from the creature clambering out of the hearth. It was small, only knee height, its skinny form blackened from soot…

"Mistress!" it cried, leaving a trail of black footprints across the pristine marble as it ran toward me. It clutched at my leg with spindly

arms.

"M-Mosswhistle?" My heart swelled in disbelief as I stared down at the top of the brownie's head. I dropped down, pulling it into a hug, the familiar smell of moss and woodland filling my nose.

I released the faery and stepped back, my palms dark with soot and ash. "How are you here?"

The brownie harrumphed. "Hard work, Mistress. Guards at door, room very high up. Mosswhistle must use the cunning of a thousand foxes to find you. Mosswhistle now knows all the secret ways in the sky palace."

"But how did you get—in there?" I waved my arms toward the chimney breast.

The brownie nodded sagely. "Climbs outside the walls at night. Very dark, no one sees. Then Mosswhistle finds the right chimney. *Then* Mosswhistle halted by fire."

The brownie twisted to show me the back of its mossy tunic, charred black.

"Mosswhistle waits until fire out, then climbs down—very sneaky, very quiet."

My cheeks ached with the broad smile across my face at the sight of Mosswhistle. I'd missed the brownie's bulbous black eyes, large ears, and pointed nose.

It stomped over to my bed, shaking its head and rearranging the mussed sheets before stepping back with a look of horror at the sooty handprints it had left on the white linen.

"How did you get to the Sky Court?" I asked before it could start cleaning.

It twisted to face me. "With the Master."

My stomach flipped at the mention of Thorne. "Is he okay?"

"Master tried to visit Mistress with his shadows." The brownie wiggled its whole body in a violent motion I could only assume was meant to represent shadow walking. "But Trials magic stops him. He tries to come to the corridor, but many guards stop him."

"But he's okay?" I pressed.

"Master is angry. And sad." Mosswhistle sucked in a long, quivering breath. "Master looks everywhere for you, Mistress. Then he goes to Rosehill, to your family. They don't trust him. But he promises he will find you. We look more. He tracks the barghest, and the púca, and all the bad fae of the Folkwood. Still can't find you. Master's heart is broken. Then Court Fae from Forest Court arrive, summon him home for Trials."

Mosswhistle's skinny shoulders slumped, its ink-drop eyes widening. "Mosswhistle and Master worry Mistress is in grave danger. Maybe even…" It lowered its voice to a whisper. "*Killed*."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, tears pricking at my eyes. “You stayed with Thorne the whole time?”

Mosswhistle nodded sagely. “Master very powerful, but brownies very helpful. Mosswhistle wants to help save Mistress. But it’s a mystery. She disappears without a trace.”

“Faolan flew me out of the rose garden.” I frowned. “He tricked me into three faerie bargains in my time at the Cursed Court, then returned to claim them.”

The brownie gave a shrill whistle, pumping its fists into the air. “Mosswhistle always knows the golden fae is trouble! What does Mosswhistle always say to the other servants? *That golden fae is trouble!*”

The brownie began pacing and muttering, leaving a new trail of narrow, sooty footprints across the white stone.

I dropped to my knees so I was closer to its eye level. “Mosswhistle, I’m so pleased to see you again. But if Thorne and I can’t go to each other, I need you to take a message to him.”

I reached out and held the brownie’s shoulders. Its bark-like skin was polished smooth, eyes wide as saucers as it continued to curse Faolan under its breath. “Are you listening? I need you to get a message to Thorne from me—can you do that? Tell him that I’m bound to Faolan with three faerie bargains. He’s making me compete as payment—one Trial per bargain.”

Mosswhistle hissed, its hackles raised. “Trials very dangerous.”

“I know,” I sighed. “So…you’ll tell him?”

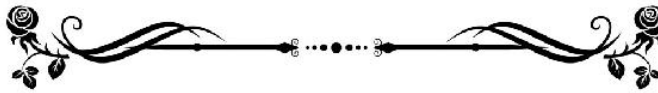
Mosswhistle nodded aggressively. “Mosswhistle carries messages with the speed of a trained falcon.” The brownie cocked its head, looking at me closely, then it leaned forward and patted my knee. “Mosswhistle tells Master. Mistress mustn’t be sad anymore. Trials are scary, but friends are here now.”

I squeezed Mosswhistle’s clawed hand, then the brownie saluted and scurried back toward the fireplace.

Kicking ash from the hearth all over the floor, it disappeared in a flurry of gray smoke.

The scrabbling sound in the walls faded, until silence fell, and I was left alone once more.

Chapter Eight



"WHERE ARE WE GOING?" I asked Bethel and Mariyad as the two servants led me up another vast, winding staircase.

Instead of a glamorous dress, today they'd chosen tight, brown, suede pants, shiny black boots, and a floaty, pale-blue blouse stitched with golden sunbursts.

Faolan's colors.

I had no idea why, or where they were taking me now. Somewhere right at the top of the Sky Court if the number of staircases we had climbed was anything to go by. Perhaps the practical outfit was a clue...

I shuddered. Were the Trials already about to begin? It had only been two days since the other champions had arrived. Had I missed my chance to speak to Thorne?

When we'd finally left my chambers and the guards, I'd half-expected the fae prince to shadow immediately to my side, but of course he would have no way of knowing I'd left the room he was forbidden from entering.

Bethel, the shorter, redheaded servant, held open an elaborately carved door into another light-filled, golden corridor, her gaze vacant as she allowed me to pass through. I paused in front of her. Her nose had a slight tilt, as if it had been broken and not set properly, and, like Mariyad, her eyes were bloodshot and dull. Both girls were dressed in the same ripe-smelling, gray tunics they had been in when I'd first met them.

"Are you all right?" I asked Bethel before turning to Mariyad.

The girls didn't answer.

I pressed my lips together and kept walking. If I wanted to try to find Thorne, it would be easy enough to run away from them. They were so lethargic and slow, their ensorcelled minds elsewhere, I wasn't sure they'd even notice if I disappeared. But I didn't know where he was, and the girls would no doubt be punished for my disobedience.

The sound of ringing metal filled the air, followed by yells and raised voices. My ears pricked, goosebumps rising across my skin.

Fighting.

Bethel opened a door, and I walked through, expecting to see fighting fae.

Instead, we emerged into a group of humans gathered in the corner of an armory.

The ceiling was open, weapons lined neatly along white walls that were dazzling in the afternoon sun. I recognized swords and lances and bows, but there were other weapons I didn't have names for—glowing orbs, long whips, wickedly sharp spikes, and riding tack that seemed far too large for horses.

I turned around. Bethel and Mariyad had disappeared back into the hall, closing the door behind them.

I returned my attention to the other humans they'd left me with. They were servants, but based on their multicolored tunics, they didn't belong to the Sky Court. The servants closest to me wore pink, stitched with blooms—servants of the Flower Court. They whispered among themselves, their cheeks flushed with color, their eyes trained dreamily on me.

Next to them, servants in smoky black robes stared down at the floor in silence. A stark white pair of horns was stitched against the material of each robe. These servants from the Shadow Court stood like wraiths, tunics hanging from skeletal bodies, their cheeks sunken and gaunt, deep-purple shadows etched beneath their eyes.

They looked on the edge of starvation.

A flare of anger burned in my stomach, the greenwitch in me wanting to go to them, to try to heal them.

I frowned as I tried to remember what I'd been told about the Tithes. Because the humans who served the Court were all Tithe servants, just like I had been. I knew that Tithes were set by the individual Courts. That the Tithe humans were taken to serve in the Fae Courts in exchange for free humans being protected by the Treaty.

But what rights did the Treaty extend to the Tithe servants? My gaze roamed their faces, looking for some clue. Some looked healthy enough, if ensorcelled, while others looked on the brink of death. How could there be such a difference in how they were treated depending on which Court they served?

"Aster," a rich voice called for me from above.

I looked up to see Faolan silhouetted above the armory, standing where the walls should have met the ceiling but instead became sky.

He leaped down toward me, landing lightly. The golden prince wrinkled his nose, as if he'd smelled something unpleasant. "You shouldn't be here with the other humans. The servants should have brought you straight to the training grounds. The showcase is over."

"What showcase? And what training gr—?"

The question was snatched from my lips as Faolan wrapped his arms around me and jumped, snapping open his wings and flying us up and out of the armory.

I sucked in a gasp as we landed on a hard surface, a cool breeze wrapping around me and ruffling my shirt. My head swam from the sudden motion and weightlessness, like I'd stood up too fast.

I took a quick step away from Faolan, trying to get my bearings. Turrets and spires of the Sky Court soared up around us. The air was cool, but sunlight bathed my limbs, taking the edge off the chill. The familiar tang of magic hung in the air, the metallic taste sticking to the back of my tongue.

I squinted, shading my eyes with a palm. We were on a rooftop, a flat white expanse that was blindingly bright in the sunlight. The stone was scarred with deep gouges and charred with scorch marks, discarded weapons littered the floor, and parts of the marble had crumbled completely under what looked like fists and footprints.

What happened up here before I arrived?

"Aster."

I turned at the sound of Faolan's voice, the note of smugness catching me off guard.

Ten pairs of glittering, fae eyes bored into me.

"I'd like to properly introduce you all to my champion," Faolan continued, speaking to the gathered heirs who stood in a semi-circle before us. "Although some of you are better acquainted with her than others..."

His voice faded into the background as my gaze locked onto a pair of unblinking, hazel eyes. The sunlit greens and golds and browns sent my stomach twisting. My mouth dried.

Thorne was just a few steps away.

It felt wrong to see the Alder Prince surrounded by bright sunshine instead of in the dappled light of the Folkwood. He belonged to the feral forest, not the open skies.

I didn't care that all of the heirs were there. My body tugged me forward, urging me to him before anyone could stop me. I wrapped my arms around him, his own snaking around me to pull me closer. I felt his lips press against my hair, emotion tightening his voice as he spoke. "Hello, petal."

"Hello, beast." My words were muffled with my face buried against his chest. I breathed in his scent and fought back tears.

"What're you thinking, Faolan?" A gruff voice rang out across the rooftop. "Entering a *human* on your behalf? A girl. Is this your way of surrendering? Do you not want the Alder Crown, after all?"

"It's Faolan. Of course he wants the crown," a sharp, female voice followed.

I pulled back from Thorne's chest to look up into his face. His jaw was set, but emotion surged behind his eyes.

I dragged my gaze from him and turned to face the other fae. Thorne draped his arm around my shoulders.

"This isn't just any human, Morven," Faolan replied mildly.

The fae he addressed was a large male, as tall as Thorne but twice as broad, with a chest like a barrel and a thick mane of hair cascading down his back. Unlike the other fae, there was a more rugged edge to his beauty. The Mountain Court champion.

Sweat broke out on the base of my spine. Was Faolan about to tell everyone I was an enchantress? I shot a look at Thorne and caught a fleeting expression of worry on his face.

Faolan splayed long fingers in my direction. "*This* is the human girl who broke Thorne's curse."

Hissed breaths followed this announcement as they all turned to stare. Thorne's arm tightened around me.

Neve, the frost princess, let out a cold laugh. "*This* is the human who freed the Alder Prince?"

"This is the human who captured the heart of our Alder Prince," Faolan replied in a silky voice.

Everyone's gaze shifted from me to Thorne. A muscle flickered along his sharp jaw, his body tense against me.

"So you entered her as a distraction," the Shadow Court prince remarked wryly, studying his nails. I couldn't help but stare at the dark horns curving from his head. "How very clever of you, Faolan. It seems all your years of Court scheming were not for waste. But, you know, if this human distracts Thorne, all that does is enhance the odds for the rest of us. You still stand no chance in getting the Alder Crown."

"I wouldn't underestimate Aster," Faolan replied enigmatically, shooting me a conspiratorial look. He cleared his throat. "But enough about my champion. Now that I've seen your skills, it's time to split you into two teams for the first Trial. As is customary for the first Trial, everyone in the winning team will go through to the second."

The first Trial is a team game?

I pressed closer to Thorne. Part of me was relieved to hear that I wouldn't be facing all of the other champions at once, but what if I was on the team opposite Thorne?

Faolan clapped his hands together, and two servants walked out onto the training ground, carrying flags to opposite sides of the rooftop.

An invisible charge filled the air, the waiting fae jostling between themselves, canines flashing and backs straightening.

"You'll be split into the sun team..." Faolan raised a hand and sent

a breeze toward the yellow flag at the eastern end of the rooftop. It unfurled and rippled, revealing a sun emblem stitched into the material. “And the star team.” The servant at the western side of the roof lifted a silver flag, Faolan’s conjured wind stirring it until a glimmering star emblem became visible.

“Vanna of the Metal Court…” Faolan didn’t raise his voice, but it carried across the rooftops on the wind. “I assign you to the sun team.”

Vanna picked at her nails. “So much unnecessary drama,” she yawned, dropping her hands and cracking her knuckles. “Really, Faolan, I’m perfectly capable of remembering which team I’m assigned without needing to parade—”

“*Sun team,*” Faolan repeated, thrusting his arm out toward the east end of the rooftop again. “And Thorne of the Forest Court… Star team.” He flung his other arm out in the opposite direction, his lip curling.

Vanna exchanged a worried look with Thorne. He leaned down to whisper in my ear, “I’ll protect you no matter what,” then threw Faolan a glare that could wither plants as he let go of me and moved to stand on the opposite side of the training ground to Vanna.

I bit my lip. After he’d tried so hard to keep us apart, there was no way Faolan would put me on Thorne’s team. But at least I would be with Vanna. “Your Highness Ren of the Flower Court,” Faolan continued, his eyes flicking to a slight, androgynous fae with short green hair.

A historical ally of the Forest Court. So no doubt—

“Sun team.” Faolan’s voice rang out.

He was putting all of Thorne’s allies on the opposite team to him.

Two emerald wings snapped out behind the flower heir’s back before they soared in a neat arc to land lightly beside Vanna.

My gaze returned to the remaining heirs, the pressure palpable, like how Thorne’s magic had felt to me when I’d first met him.

“Prince Morven of the Mountain Court,” Faolan continued, addressing the broadest male. “Star team.”

The huge Mountain Court champion swaggered over to stand beside Thorne. I held my breath. The next two champions, Princess Sereia of the Sea Court and Prince Badriyah of the Desert Court, were both assigned to Vanna’s team before the white-haired Princess Neve of the Frost Court and the horned Prince Kage of the Shadow Court were both assigned to Thorne’s team. There were so many champions, so many names to remember, I forgot them almost as soon as Faolan announced them.

Finally, just the princess from the River Court and me were left.

She paid me no attention, instead watching Faolan intently. Her

long, navy hair floated in tendrils around her head like she was underwater in a way that reminded me of Wispwing. Her pale skin glowed luminous in the sunlight, a faint pattern of blue scales shimmering along her bare calves.

I clenched my fingers at my side, my nails cutting into my palms. No doubt Faolan would put her with Thorne's star team instead of me.

"Nerida of the River Court… Sun team," Faolan announced. The river princess shot me a watery smile, then drifted over to join the others, clasping the Sea Princess's hand as she joined them.

"Which leaves Aster…"

With Thorne.

"Star team, I know," I replied breathlessly, already hurrying across the rooftop.

I was so grateful, I didn't even have the energy to wonder why Faolan had put us together.

Faolan's voice rang out over the sound of my footsteps. "You have two days before the first Trial. I suggest you use that time to get to know your teammates and train together."

"Why do we get the human?" Cruel, sharp voices rose around me as I joined the four fae on my team. Thorne brushed his hand across my cheek, tucking a dark lock of hair behind my ear.

"This weak little human stands at your side like she's your equal." The huge Mountain Court fae loomed behind me, his shadow blocking the sun.

I turned to face him, feeling safer than I had since arriving at the Sky Court now that I was within Thorne's reach. I tilted my chin. "You know nothing about me."

Morven's brows jumped up. "She has some bite, I'll give her that," he addressed Thorne in a low, rumbling voice. His lips rubbed together, then he turned back to me. "So tell me, tiny human, what use will you be to us in the Trials? Can you even lift a sword?" He patted the huge broadsword hanging at his hip.

Neve, the frost princess, snickered.

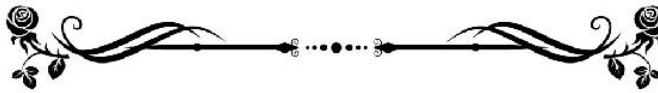
"Show us your talents then, human." The Shadow Court champion raked his gaze up and down my body. "Faolan's alluded to them enough."

Thorne shifted in front of me, shadows misting around him. "Faolan says a lot of things. You'd be a fool to take them all at face value. Now, Aster and I have things to discuss."

The rest of the team fell silent, their expressions still openly hostile.

"Let's get out of here." Thorne grabbed my hand, and the other champions disappeared in a swirl of dark smoke.

Chapter Nine



I LANDED HEAVILY, feet skidding over slanted, gold tiles. I squinted, blinking rapidly as I looked around, and my mouth dried.

Thorne had shadowed us to one of the tower rooftops.

It was freezing up here. The blue sky was bright overhead, and I could just make out the other fae figures still circling the training ground on the rooftop far below us.

"Silver bells, Thorne," I ground out, lurching backward to a sitting position and pressing myself against the roof, my heart in my throat. I could almost feel myself slipping over the smooth, cool tiles, closer toward the edge. "I'm glad to be away from the others, but do you really think balancing us precariously on the top of a spire is the best place to speak?"

Thorne stood at the top of the sloping roof, looking down at me as casually as if we'd taken a stroll through the grounds of the Cursed Court to get here. "Too high for you, petal?"

"Just a little, beast." I forced myself to take several deep breaths, my exhales clouding in the air.

Warmth tingled along my arm as I felt Thorne slide down the roof to sit beside me. He emanated heat like a furnace, and I leaned closer, adrenaline still coursing through me from being so high up.

"Up here, I can keep an eye on the other champions, and we can talk away from Faolan and his spies." He faced me, his eyes bright, staring at me as if he were trying to memorize my features. "I missed you, Aster." He slid an arm around me, pulling me closer even though there was no gap between us at all. "I missed you so much it hurt."

I'd only been without Thorne for a matter of days. For him, it had been months.

"I missed you too." Tears pricked at my eyes again.

His throat bobbed. "When I woke and found you gone...I assumed the worst. That Yvette had somehow taken you. But her body was unmoved."

"Mosswhistle said you went to Rosehill."

"I thought you might have returned to your family, to check on Ava."

"You spoke to my sisters?"

He gave a dark laugh. "Yes. At least, I tried to get a word in edgewise."

A ripple of guilt swept over me that I hadn't given much thought to my family since waking at the Sky Court. "Are they okay?"

"They're well...even if none of them liked me very much. I met your father, too." Amusement flickered behind his eyes. "I see what you mean now when you said he wasn't very *fae*. But I swore to them I would find you. They may not trust me, but they know fae can't lie." His voice hardened. "After I visited Rosehill, I spent weeks hunting down the fae of the Folkwood, convinced one of them had taken you. Then my father summoned me back to the Forest Court to compete in the Trials. He told me not to throw away my duty as Forest Court heir for a human girl. That you'd probably just left me." His jaw clenched. "When I arrived yesterday, I still had no idea if I was going to compete or withdraw. But I thought I'd see whether Faolan had heard anything..."

"You never thought I'd just left you?" I asked tentatively.

Thorne fell quiet, suddenly very interested in what was going on down below in the training ground. "In my darker moments, I considered it," he admitted. "I still find it...difficult, petal. To understand why… How you could truly love me. I was the Beast of the Folkwood. I took you as a Tithe prisoner. And you saw me...in my other form."

My heart lurched, and I leaned into him, wishing that I could soothe away all of his tangled hurt and shame about that other form, about what Yvette had done to him.

He stilled beneath my touch. "But I knew that you loved me, or else you couldn't have broken the curse." He barked a short laugh. "And I knew you would never disappear without saying goodbye to your family."

A cool breeze curled around us, and I shivered, my breath light and tight in my chest. The wisps of cloud overhead were so close I could have reached up and touched them. Breathing in Thorne's familiar scent of smoke and rosewood reminded me of firelit nights in the forest, and I savored this tiny moment of calm.

"The brownie said you're tied to Faolan by three bargains. One per trial." Thorne's words brought me quickly back to reality.

I lifted my head from his shoulder, nodding.

Thorne sighed heavily. "Faerie bargains make use of ancient fae magic. If you don't take part in the Alder Trials, Faolan will take something else from you. Anything else that he deems of equal value."

"I know. He threatened me with that already." I ran a thumb over Thorne's sleeve, the black material shimmering an iridescent green in

the daylight. “What I don’t get is *why*. Why would he betray you and trick me just to enter a human into a fae competition?”

“That slippery golden puck will have his reasons.”

My knuckles turned white as I gripped the roof tiles more tightly. “Down there, the others said that he entered me to distract you.”

Thorne let out a low growl. “That’ll be one of his reasons.”

“Why give up his chance of actually winning the crown to distract just one of the competitors?” I began nervously unpicking the end of my braid.

“Because I’m the strongest competitor and most likely to win,” he replied simply, no hint of pride in his voice.

I rolled my eyes. “Sure you are, Thorne.”

But his expression was serious. “You know I can’t lie. I’m not bragging when I say I’m the strongest of all of them. By a long stretch.”

I stared at him, looking for any hint that he was joking and finding none. “Because you’re the Alder Prince?”

Thorne shook his head. “My magic…is different. It’s one of a kind.” He braced his hands on his knees. “You already know that fae magic is linked to their Court and that it’s strongest within their own territory. But mine... I was born with the magic of every Court.”

I took a sharp breath.

“Because of that,” he continued, “I’m the biggest threat ever to enter the Trials. I have the power of every other champion, and I’m not weakened by fighting in a Court that isn’t my own. But the Alder Trials rules don’t account for someone like me. They don’t forbid me from entering.”

“How..?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. My parents were both from the Forest Court. If they know anything more, they never told me.”

My shoulders slumped. “So Faolan doesn’t want you to win. That’s why he wanted you to stay cursed for another year. So you couldn’t enter.”

Thorne nodded.

I dropped my half-unwoven braid to put a gentle hand on his arm. “Why wouldn’t he want you to become Alder King?”

“From what I’ve seen…it’s because our politics differ.” Thorne’s voice dropped to a murmur, his hazel eyes trained on me, dark lashes lowered. He placed his hand over mine. His hot palm was soft against my skin, and a thrill ran through me, despite where I was, despite everything he’d told me.

“So I will be a distraction for you, like they said,” I whispered.

“You are a constant distraction for me, Aster.” Thorne’s beautiful face was perfectly serious. “Forget the Trials. You are my first thought

when I wake, my last when I sleep. I don't care if I'm Alder King or not. My only priority is you. I will get you through to the third Trial so you can pay your debts to Faolan. And once you are free, we'll make him pay."

My ribcage suddenly felt too tight for my chest. I fixed him with a long look. "I love that you want to protect me, but you shouldn't have to give up your chances of being Alder King because of me. Besides, I might be human, but I'm not powerless. I'm an enchantress. You've seen what I can do. Maybe I can hold my own in these challenges."

"You can't show the other fae your enchanting powers, Aster." Thorne sat up straighter, suddenly agitated. "Aside from the Forest Court, Vanna, and Faolan, none of the other fae know humans can access magic. And it has to stay that way."

I pressed my lips together, turning over Thorne's words. Faolan had shared the secret with at least one member of his family. "Aurora knows, too," I told him.

"And the rest of the Sky Court?" he asked sharply.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

A worried line creased his forehead. "In that case, we have even more reason to be careful…" He reached into his dark shirt and pulled out a velvet pouch. He opened the drawstring and gestured for me to reach inside. I pulled out a string of rowan beads that gleamed like red-orange pearls.

These were far more beautifully crafted than the necklace I'd owned in Rosehill, the one I'd given to Farmer Hawley on the day of the Tithe. But they both had the same purpose. To protect the human wearer against fae ensorcellment.

"The berries are threaded onto an iron wire, so no fae will be able to take it off you. Wear it at all times, and don't trust any of the fae, even those who are on our team."

I looped the beads over my neck. "I thought it was part of the Alder Trials magic that the champions can't harm one another outside of the Trials?"

"I'd rather not put it to the test if that extends to whether they can ensorcel you to hurt yourself."

I rolled one bead nervously between my thumb and forefinger. Thorne had just told me I needed to keep the enchanters a secret, but the more I learned about what was in store for me at the Sky Court, the less happy I was about the idea of relying on Thorne to defend me.

"Why do I have to hide my enchanting?" I blurted. "I get that it's a secret, but why does it matter if the fae know? I used my enchanting in front of the Court Fae and Little Folk at the Lúnasa revel. Remember, when I made those thorns grow from the ground?"

"I explained that away as part of the curse. The other fae all

believe the Cursed Court was created by Forest Court magic." Thorne stood suddenly, then held out his hand.

I let him pull me to my feet but kept hold of his hand, standing, staring out across the shining white turrets and spires and golden rooftops of the Sky Court—a palace in the clouds.

The breeze teased out the last of my braid, my unbound hair fluttering around my shoulders.

Thorne cleared his throat, then continued, "When he was in the Forest Court, as my father's ward, Faolan learned about enchanting." His gaze slid sideways to me. "My best guess is that he's interpreted what the enchanters can do as a threat. That he's...not pleased to have discovered that some humans are powerful enough to curse or enchant us."

My blood ran cold, despite the warm fae body at my side.

Thorne sighed. "Faolan's father was always an ally of ours. When he passed, Faolan returned home to rule the Sky Court."

"If Faolan's in charge, why isn't he king?"

"Only heirs can compete in the Alder Trials—the eldest prince or princess of each Court. Faolan's delayed the coronation so he can compete. But his word is still law here, and it seems things have gotten much worse for the Tithe humans since he returned."

I winced. "And if the other Courts find out about my enchanting—they might think the same? That humans could be a threat?"

Thorne squeezed my hand, although his expression remained grim. "We can't underestimate Faolan. He gets to set the challenges—he may design them so that you have an advantage if you use your enchanting."

"But surely that's not allowed? The whole point of him having a champion from outside his Court is to keep it fair."

"You're right. The host isn't permitted to set the Trials in favor of any one *fae* Court. But you're not fae. There's every chance he'll have created these Trials with your strengths in mind."

I stared down at the other champions far below us, trying to spot Faolan's golden glow.

Thorne ran his thumb over the back of my hand. "I need you to trust me that I'll get you through the Trials safely. And I need you to promise that you won't use your enchantments, no matter what."

I bit my lip. I wouldn't reveal my enchanting to the other fae, not if there was a risk that revealing the secret would turn them against humans. "I won't use my enchantments." I gave him a thin smile. "I've not found any plants to work with anyway…"

Thorne turned to face me, his hazel eyes serious. "I know it's a lot to ask. To appear powerless when you're capable of protecting yourself..."

He ran his fingers through my hair, trailing them along the back of my neck. My whole body heated, and suddenly it wasn't the height that was making my stomach spin anymore.

I pressed both of my hands against his chest, feeling the warm muscles tense beneath. We were together, and alone, for the first time since reuniting.

"Aster..." His voice hitched. "I'm sorry you've been dragged into my world like this. If you'd never have met me, you'd be safe, at home in Rosehill."

I leaned closer, tilting my head up. "Well, I'm not sorry to have met you. At all."

Thorne ran his fingers around the neckline of my blouse, the points of his canines pressing into his bottom lip. "I hate to see you in Sky Court colors."

I pressed closer. "You prefer the mud-spattered, grass-stained pinafores?"

His eyes darkened, his hold on me tightening. My breath caught in my throat, his scent, his presence making me forget everything beyond his arms. He leaned forward, and my eyes fluttered closed.

His lips barely grazed mine before he lurched away with a growl.

My eyes shot open, a prickle of magic and rush of darkness dampening the sunlight.

"So, here are the love birds."

I swiveled to face the Shadow Court champion.

He lounged against the top of the spire, his cloak whipping out behind him, dissolving into misty trails of smoke at the ends. His shining pewter hair was tied back from his face, stark against the black of his horns and his outfit. "Conspiring against the rest of us, are we?"

"Kage." Thorne addressed him, his voice sharp as a blade.

The shadow prince gave us both a lazy smile. "The rest of your team are waiting. We need to train for the first Trial. And we need you both alive…" His gaze dropped to my throat, and I realized he was staring at the rowan beads. "…for now."

Thorne started toward him with a growl, but Kage shadowed, reappearing right in front of me like a phantom. I gasped and staggered back as Kage dissolved into shadows again.

I threw out my arms, wheeling them, catching my balance before I could topple straight off the rooftop.

Thorne clutched my arm, breathing heavily as he pulled me toward him. "Aster—"

"I'm fine," I reassured him, although my heart felt like a tiny bird fluttering against my ribcage.

Even the fae on our own team wanted me dead. Thorne was right

—without my enchantment, I would need his protection.

I remembered the gaunt, pale faces of the Shadow Court servants in the armory. If they were anything to go by, there was no doubt Kage hated humans.

My fingers stroked the rowan beads, suddenly very glad Thorne had gifted them to me. “Let’s get out of here…” I murmured, before realization stirred. When Thorne shadowed from place to place…

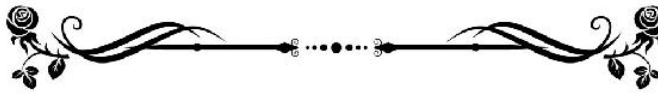
I stared up at him. “Your shadow walking…”

“Is magic from the Shadow Court,” he confirmed.

So he really did have magic from all of the other Courts. How had I never noticed that before? I wondered what else I’d seen him do that went far beyond the magic of a Forest Court fae.

But before I could ask him, he wrapped a strong arm around my waist, and blue skies dissolved into darkness once again.

Chapter Ten



THE WIND RIPPED across the terrace, dashes of snow turning to water as they met with the bubble of heat that encased the Sky Court, darkening the pale stone beneath our feet. The icy drops glittered in the thin light, speckling the bare skin on my forearms. The floaty, gray blouse Faolan had provided for me today stuck damply to my skin, the embroidered clouds itchy.

Yet the cool, spattered rain was no doubt welcomed by the rest of the star team, red-faced with exertion.

The heirs to the Shadow, Frost, and Mountain Courts hurled their magic around the open space, demonstrating to one another what they were capable of in increasingly showy displays of their magic.

Neve spun complex walls of frost and snow, a latticework of white that surrounded her like a cocoon, sharp knives of ice occasionally splintering through the air.

"As you might have guessed, summoning ice and snow is Frost Court magic," Thorne murmured, nudging me with his elbow. Unlike the others, he wasn't showing off but lounged back against the edge of the terrace beside me, regarding the other heirs through narrowed eyes.

He might look relaxed...but I could sense the prickle of his magic, the tension in the curve of his body as he prepared to defend us both against any magic flung our way.

I shifted my gaze to where the huge-framed Morven smashed his way around the terrace, his fists like iron as they splintered through every icy obstacle Neve summoned. He moved with incredible speed for someone so powerfully built and, periodically, he seemed to blur into a different form, something furred and sharp-toothed that reminded me uneasily of the púca...

"The Mountain Court fae can shapeshift." Thorne continued to offer a commentary in a low voice. "They can take the form of one of the mountain creatures who share their lands—stags, hares, eagles. Morven's other form is a wolf."

I tried not to look like this alarmed me, instead squinting to try to get a better look at the whirling, shaggy creature that the muscled

mountain prince morphed into.

"That's a lot of hair," I quipped. My gaze slid to the far side of the terrace to where the shadow prince was lurking, and I shivered. "And the Shadow Court?" I asked in a small voice. Even a fae who could turn into a wolf didn't frighten me as much as the shadow prince.

Kage leaned against the wall at the far side of the terrace, his pose mirroring ours almost mockingly, dark shadows curling around him. Every so often, Neve or Morven would slow, stumble, their movements turning clumsy, their jaws slackening as a dreamy, anguished expression flitted across their faces.

Each time, the shadow prince smiled.

I shifted nervously, the wall surrounding the terrace bumping hard against the small of my back.

"Mind magic," Thorne said. "The shadow fae can also shadow walk, like I can...but right now, Kage is using magic on their minds." He smirked. "Fortunately, it doesn't work on me." His gaze dropped to my throat. "And it won't work on you as long as you're wearing your rowan beads."

A knot formed in my chest, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth.

Silver bells, Faolan wants me to take on these *fae?*

A shiver ran over my skin.

And these were just the fae on my own team... Folk knew what magic the other heirs wielded. The sun team had been provided with their own training space, so I wouldn't get to see what they could do until the first Trial.

My gaze slid between the fae whom I'd be fighting alongside, trying hard to commit their names and powers to memory. Neve of the Frost Court, with her long, white hair and ice crackling at her fingertips. Kage of the Shadow Court, clad in night-black robes, amethyst eyes glowering out from beneath his twin horns and mane of silver hair as he preyed on the others' minds. Hulking Morven of the Mountain Court, who was built like a mountain himself… *Plus the whole turning into a wolf thing.*

And, of course, there was Thorne.

His magic was likely the greatest mystery of all.

As if they'd caught the direction of my thoughts, the others turned as one and stalked toward us, Neve leading the way.

"We've seen enough of what we can do." She gestured to Morven and Kage with one pearl-pale hand, then crossed her arms. "It's important to see what *everyone* on our team can do." Her gaze slid slowly over Thorne.

"Time to see how true the rumors are, Alder Prince." Kage's voice came from behind the others, laced with venom.

Thorne just gave a lazy smile. “Worried I’ll show you up?”

The fixed, cold smile didn’t leave Kage’s face. “They say you have powers from every court…but which powers, exactly?”

“I think you’ll find my powers more than sufficient to contribute to our *team effort.*”

“And what about you, human? What skills do you bring to our team?” The Mountain Court champion’s rumbling voice cut across Kage. His words were mistrustful, his eyes narrowing as they fixed on me.

My lips thinned at the dismissive tone…but at least he’d addressed me directly. That was more than Neve and Kage had bothered with.

The two other heirs whipped around, staring at me with matching sneers stamped across their faces.

“You’re right, Morven. Faolan must have chosen her for some reason…” Neve prowled forward, circling around me, as though looking for evidence that there was something more to me than she had originally anticipated.

Kage didn’t follow, but his purple eyes tracked my every slightest movement, the smile that had made me feel so uneasy as he’d used his mind magic on Neve and Morven flitting across his face.

I jerked back as Neve reached out and plucked at my damp sleeve. “You certainly don’t *look* like much…but Faolan was so quick to interrupt our questions before…”

They can’t know about my enchanting.

“I can use a knife,” I said, lifting my chin. “My dad taught me how to use one.”

“A knife!” Morven scoffed, waving one hand through the air before repeating again with a shake of his head, “A *knife*.”

“Let’s see what knife skills you think will aid you in the Alder Trials, then, human,” Neve said silkily. “Will you carve up the other team for us?”

A shiver ran down my spine, but I reached for the knife I’d picked out from the armory earlier.

“Aster.” Thorne’s voice was low in warning. “You don’t need to do this.”

To my horror, the frost princess drew a long, thin blade from her belt, a cruel smile splitting her face as she angled it toward me. “You’ll need an opponent, of course,” she crooned.

“I’ll do it,” Thorne said quickly, stepping between the two of us. Reaching out, he swiped the blade from Neve’s hand.

“You’ll go easy on her,” Morven barked. “We need to see what she can do.”

“I won’t,” Thorne said.

For a moment, I was surprised as the other fae backed off. Then I

realized—of course, if Thorne said he wouldn't go easy on me, he must really mean it. He couldn't lie.

Uneasily, I turned to face the forest fae, my knife gripped in my right hand.

I mentally ran through everything my father had ever told me. Shifting my weight onto my toes, I danced back from Thorne, giving myself some space.

I kept my eyes trained on him, waiting for him to strike. He would be faster than me, stronger, so my best bet was just to wait and—

Thorne's blade tore through the air.

I yelped as it clashed with mine so hard that my hand spasmed, the force of the blow sending my knife spinning across the terrace.

I stared at where it rotated against the damp stone, the thin blade flashing in the light.

"Pick it up," he said shortly.

Cheeks burning, I tripped across the tiles and collected my blade, my palm still smarting with pain as I tried to grip it. Trying a different tactic, I flipped the knife so that it pointed downward. Not pausing, I went in low, sweeping the blade toward Thorne's belly.

Thorne blocked it instantly and, with a twist of his own knife, sent mine flying again. It clattered onto the stone, the sound ringing through the air.

Neve laughed, then stopped abruptly. "*This* is Faolan's choice of champion?" Her brow furrowed. "It doesn't make any sense…"

The burning in my cheeks grew hotter. I *was* good with a knife...by human standards. But what did they expect? I stood no chance competing against a fae.

"And what interesting taste you seem to have developed, Thorne," Kage mocked. "I guess being stuck in a beast form for the best part of a century affected more than just your body."

"Watch what you say about animal forms," Morven growled, his eyes flashing yellow. "You have a lot of opinions about beasts for someone with two horns sticking out of your head." He scrubbed a hand across his jaw. "But when it comes to the human...I agree. A team game means we need *everyone's* powers."

A knot formed in my chest, but I held back the words on the tip of my tongue. I'd promised Thorne I wouldn't betray the other humans.

The forest prince was perfectly still beside me, his body tense, and I had no doubt he was struggling to prevent himself from defending me to the others. "You have me," he said coolly, as if that settled the matter, "and believe me, that's more power than you could possibly need."

Morven let out a strangled sound that reminded me unnervingly of a howling wolf. "I've seen enough."

My shoulders slumped as they all retreated, Kage reaching for Neve's hand and dissolving the two of them into shadow, Morven slamming through the doors back into the palace.

Of course, I knew they'd underestimated me. They didn't know what I could do with my enchantments.

But I wouldn't be able to *use* my enchantments in the Trials…

As a sense of defeat sent an uncomfortable, oily feeling down my spine, I slid my knife back into its sheath.

"What do you think you're doing?"

I jumped. Thorne was right behind me, so close I could feel the heat of him through my blouse. "Draw your blade," he said in a low, throaty voice.

I twisted, rolling my eyes. "Showing me up twice wasn't enough for you?"

Thorne sheathed Neve's knife in his belt, then, in one smooth movement, he closed the gap between us. His palm slid over the back of my hand, moving it to the hilt of my knife and closing my fingers around it. "You need to be able to defend yourself."

The corners of my lips tugged upward. "I suppose you weren't a completely terrible teacher when I was learning to use my enchantments…"

A lazy smile spread across Thorne's face, his fingers tightening around my hand. "Notice that by the time I'd finished with you, you managed to defeat the Alder King's most powerful enchantress, revered across the Forest Court as the most powerful human in our lands."

I tutted. "You don't think I deserve any credit for that?"

"On the contrary, I think you were spectacular. The most brilliant enchantress I've ever seen."

A ripple of pleasure ran through me at his praise.

"But you're not going to be able to use your enchanting magic while you're here."

I raised an eyebrow, then lifted my thumb, grazing it slowly across Thorne's palm. Wriggling closer to him, I snaked my free hand around his waist, and he let out a low, rumbling growl that had my heart racing.

"I think you'll find I'm not as helpless as you think, *beast*," I said in a breathless voice.

"Oh?" he murmured. "Is that so, petal?"

Triumphant, I pulled back, drawing Neve's knife from his belt as I did so and holding it aloft. "The others warned you I'd be a distraction. It turns out I can be *very* distracting when I put my mind to it…"

For a second, he stared at Neve's blade, clutched in my hand.

Then, letting out a bark of laughter, he tugged me closer, his nose grazing mine. “What I’d advise right now is that a certain beguiling enchantress forget about my suggestion I train her. I can think of something better we can do now that we’re finally alone…”

“Not *quite*,” an amused, singsong voice interrupted us.

Thorne didn’t move. “What are you doing here, Faolan?” he breathed, his face still inches away from mine, barely contained rage making his voice quiver.

“I’d be lying if I said I was sorry,” Faolan said breezily, “but regardless, I need Aster to come with me. Now.”

Thorne slowly drew back, but his fingers tightened around my arms.

I turned angrily to Faolan, crossing my arms as I moved away from Thorne. “What makes you think I’ll go anywhere with you?”

“In case you’ve forgotten, Aster, you’re the Sky Court champion. You’re expected for drinks this afternoon with the rest of my Court, who are all rather eager to meet you. I don’t intend to disappoint them...and given that you owe me, I’d think you wouldn’t want to, either.”

“Drinks with other Sky Court fae isn’t part of our bargain,” I said coolly.

“You agreed to compete. Think of this as one of your duties as my champion.”

Thorne clacked his teeth together. “Aster and I aren’t quite finished here. She can join you later. If you can track her down again, of course…”

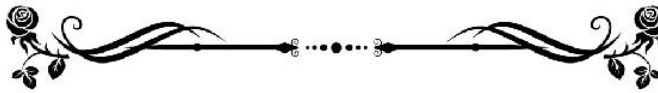
Shadows curled from between his fingers, but Faolan just laughed.

“You’re in my palace now, Thorne, not that dreary forest of yours. I have eyes everywhere. And while she is here, Aster is *my* champion, not your curse breaker.” His lips curved up. “She owes me...and if the two of you want her to make it through these Trials, you’ll appreciate that *I* am better placed to advise her. And I’d think you might want some advice before the first Trial tomorrow.”

Moving closer, Faolan reached out and grabbed my arms. “We haven’t much time before we’re expected by the others...but we can’t have you turning up looking like this.” His gaze shifted to Thorne, his eyes flashing. “Before anything else, we’ll get you out of these clothes…”

Ignoring the furious growl Thorne let out at his suggestive tone, Faolan tugged me closer and spirited us both into the air.

Chapter Eleven



I TAPPED one fingernail against the edge of the glass flute clutched in my hand. The pure, ringing sound joined the chiming voices of the sky fae gathered in the room—the high, tinkling chatter of butterfly-winged Little Folk flitting around with jugs of sparkling honey wine and the hum of Court Fae gossiping with one another.

Talking about me, no doubt.

When he'd interrupted Thorne and me, Faolan had suggested he was going to give me some clue as to what the first challenge entailed. I'd guessed it might have something to do with my enchanting…but so far he hadn't told me anything at all, let alone anything useful. After a quick stop in my room so I could change, the sky prince had abandoned me in this room full of glittering Sky Court fae. All of whom stared at me with undisguised interest as I wandered between them.

I swallowed as a golden-skinned fae dressed in pale-blue robes lined with sapphires ran his eyes slowly over my body then looked away. It was impossible to read what any of them were thinking. In Rosehill, Laurel would have gutted any man who'd given me such a proprietary look, but I had no idea how this fae viewed me. As a servant? An object of desire? A pawn in Faolan's games?

I reached a hand to my chest, my fingers feeling for the reassuring bumps of the rowan bead necklace tucked out of sight beneath my dress.

At least I couldn't be ensorcelled.

My other hand tightening around my glass, I turned and strode quickly over to the huge, open windows where the sky fae arrived, fluttering in on delicate wings, each costume more extravagant than the last. The low afternoon sun banked in through the arches so that the fae appeared like shadows at first before landing to reveal pointed hoods, crowns shaped like antennae, gold spun like spiderwebs beneath their arms. All were dressed in sky shades—palest blue, muted grays, the golden-cerulean of late afternoon.

For once, I was tempted to drink, no matter that I had no idea whether the liquid in my glass was fit for humans. I didn't even drink

human wine, but Faolan, of course, hadn't thought to provide any water for me.

Still, desperate not to stand out any more than I already did, I held the glass aloft, as though I were about to take a sip, sweeping my other hand down the billowing skirts of the azure gown Faolan had given me. I sighed, shifting from foot to foot, my feet already aching from being pressed into a pair of delicate, heeled shoes.

I eyed one of the low couches lining the edge of the room. It was tempting to sit, gaze out of the windows, and try to forget about the predators swirling around me. Stealing closer and casting a quick glance around the room to make sure no one was paying particular attention to me, I lowered myself onto the brushed velvet.

But only seconds later, an elegant fae form dropped into the seat beside me.

I twisted, anticipating Faolan, then startled.

I didn't recognize the male seated beside me, his skin deep gold and shining with that same light that Faolan's did. He looked older than Faolan, somehow, although his face was as perfect as all the others.

He extended one long arm along the back of the couch, turning wide, ink-blue eyes upon me.

"Enchanted," he said, with a tip of his head.

I swallowed, lowering my glass before dipping my head in return.

"Likewise," I mumbled, too nervous to say anything else.

My gaze darted around the room, looking for Faolan. In spite of everything, I still half-expected him to guide me around this situation, to show me how to navigate this fae world he had so unceremoniously dropped me into.

But there was still no sign of the sky prince.

"Tell me," the fae beside me said, "am I the first to talk to you this evening?"

I nodded slowly.

A smile spread over his face. "Then I am the first member of the Sky Court to speak to the first ever human champion?" His voice came out in a purr, a low rumble in this chest, like velvet, setting my teeth on edge. "An honor."

I gave him a watery smile. "And whom do I have the honor of meeting?"

There was the faintest pause, the fae's nostrils flaring slightly. "Faolan did not brief you on his guests, then?" His tone was mild, inquiring, but I sensed the sharpness behind the words.

The lump building in my throat seemed to stick.

Faolan hadn't briefed me, but although that was hardly my fault, who knew whether this fae would see it that way?

“There hasn’t been…much time…since I arrived at the Sky Court,” I said in a halting voice. “I’m afraid in between learning about the other champions and how to best represent the Sky Court in these games, I haven’t been able to learn half as much as I would have liked about the fae I’m representing.” I paused, considering my words.

Thorne could guess when I was lying. But would this fae? If he’d had little exposure to humans, he might just take my words at face value.

“I should think…you're the most important fae in this room,” I tried.

The fae’s brow creased slightly. He raised a hand to his chin, stroking it thoughtfully. “Are all humans so perceptive?”

I bit back a smile at how easily flattered these fae were. I composed my expression into one of sincerity.

“Humans are very perceptive when they’re not ensorcelled.” My gaze slid to the servants at the edge of the room, my insides pinching at the sight of their drab clothes and sickly complexions, so at odds to the finely dressed, glowing fae they served.

“Fascinating,” he murmured, leaning closer.

“Larkrise!” a thin, female voice interrupted. “So, *you* cornered our guest. It comes as no surprise, of course, but share her with the rest of us, won't you?”

In spite of there being little space on the couch for more than two, the female fae perched on my other side, one knee knocking against mine. She was dressed entirely in long strips of a shimmering turquoise material that turned pink and gold wherever it caught the light.

“Wishbeam,” Larkrise greeted her, lifting his glass.

“I have a question,” she said earnestly, “of an academic nature.”

I blinked. “Uh—sure. Go ahead.”

“I overheard you talking to Larkrise about humans,” she said, her brow wrinkled. “From what I’ve heard, Faolan fooled you quite easily into striking several bargains with him.” Her eyes ran over me, cool and disdainful. “So then how can you claim that humans are perceptive?”

A scrape sounded against her glass, and I saw that her nails, painted blue and sharpened to points, had tightened against it.

I lifted my chin, meeting her eyes, and startled at the color. Gold like the sun.

There was something hungry, vulpine about this fae’s face—as perfect as any other Court Fae, but more savage, somehow.

“Well?” Her voice returned to its previous light tone, her temper contained. “It would be of great interest to me to learn just how foolish mortals are.”

Uneasily, I noticed other fae bodies around us, drawing closer to hear my answer. A flurry of retorts came to mind.

I could praise the talents of human Craft, defending the honor of my people. I could tell them about the books written by scholars, the symphonies composed, the great works of art created by master painters.

I could even lie to them. Embellish. Tell them anything at all about how brilliant humans were.

But would that be much better than revealing the existence of enchanters? Faolan and his sister knew about enchanting, but did the rest of his Court? It wasn't worth the risk. "I…"

A slender, pale hand shot toward me, grasping my wrist. "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but I'm afraid I must."

I looked up, and my breath caught in my throat. Aurora clasped my wrist, a surprising amount of strength in her slim fingers. And while the other sky fae had dressed in Faolan's colors, like the day...Aurora was dressed for the night, in layers of inky blue studded with gemstones that shone like real stars.

I recalled Thorne once telling me about a seamstress he knew who could sew starlight into a dress, and I wondered whether *this* was what he'd meant.

A tug in my chest urged me to touch it, to feel what might be the work of another enchantress, some distant sister, beneath my fingertips.

Aurora's lips curved up into an apologetic smile. "Aster and I need to speak alone. Please forgive me for dragging her away from you."

Giving a sharp tug on my wrist, she pulled me stumbling to my feet, still gawking at her.

As she marched me away from the gaggle of fae gathered around the couch, Aurora loosed a breath, tossing her peach-blonde hair back behind her shoulders. "Hollow hills," she muttered. She shot me a sidelong look. "What were you going to tell them?"

I shrugged. "I hadn't decided yet," I said honestly.

Her brow wrinkled. "You'd think, in all their time here, that Larkrise and Wishbeam would have gotten to know just *one* of the humans employed in our services…"

I glared at her. "*Employed*?" I repeated. "What an interesting use of the word."

Her sharp fingers dug painfully into my wrist. "It wasn't always like this," she said in a crisp voice. "Humans used to be viewed differently here."

I eyed her suspiciously. The fae couldn't lie, so there must be some element of truth in what Aurora was saying. Although I supposed *differently* could mean anything.

“Why did you help me?” I asked bluntly, suddenly tired of engaging in these fae games.

Color flooded her cheeks. “You didn’t question me when I helped you before, when I showed you the glasshouses. Besides, I’ve since found out we have a friend in common.”

I had the vague feeling Aurora was still avoiding my question, but I couldn’t help myself. “Who?”

“Vanna,” she said. “She asked me to keep an eye on you, in case Faolan decided to…” She trailed off, her features contorting into a worried expression.

“It's okay,” I said. “I don't expect you to say anything against your brother. Thank you.” *And thank Folk for Vanna*.

Aurora pursed her lips, a strange expression crossing her face, but she inclined her head.

“How do you know Vanna?” I asked, hoping that if the other sky fae saw me engrossed in conversation with Aurora, they wouldn't dare interrupt the princess.

“Through the Forest Court,” she replied. “Faolan grew up there, you know, but we visited him often. And Vanna was often at Court too, of course, because—” She cut herself off mid-sentence, biting down on her lip. “She had her own ties to the Forest Court,” she finished.

My brow pinched. *What ties?* I still didn't understand what linked Vanna to Thorne’s Court. What explained the tattooed forest motif on her back. Had she and Thorne been involved somehow? Was that why Aurora was so reluctant to tell me more?

I opened my mouth to ask her, but before I could speak, we were surrounded by more sky fae.

Larkrise, the fae male who had seated himself beside me on the couch, was accompanied by a number of other courtiers, each more dazzling than the last. All of them fixed bright eyes on me.

“Another question for the champion, if you’ll allow it, Your Highness.” Larkrise swept into a low bow before Aurora, extending his arms to either side so that his sleeves rippled down like banners, embroidered with a pattern that matched his wings.

Aurora bit down on her lip, her gaze darting around the room.

How risky was this for her, to try to help me, if it went against her brother’s wishes?

A fae who was almost completely bare, his body painted in the colors of a sunrise, pushed his way to the front of the group before announcing, “It’s a question about enchanters.”

My blood froze.

He knew.

Did they *all* know?

My heart began thudding in my chest, beating fast and loud.

Faolan must have told them. The Forest Court's greatest secret...and he had shared it with his Court.

If the secret of enchanting reached the other Courts who were here to compete...

My mouth turned dry—then shadows rent apart the air between us, and I stumbled back a step.

My heart leaped as a tall, swaggering fae male materialized before me.

Wearing a deep forest-green jacket over a flowing, cream shirt, Thorne stepped out of the air as easily as if he'd just stepped through a doorway, flicking a speck of dust off one shoulder.

I couldn't keep a grin from blossoming over my face as Larkrise took a sharp step back—as *all* the fae around us shrank away, wary expressions stamped across their faces.

"Sorry I'm late." Thorne delicately swept the flute from my hand, tilting it so that bubbles popped softly against the glass. He arched an eyebrow. "No one offered you water, petal?" He tutted. "Sky Court hospitality really isn't what it used to be."

"Someone fetch her some water!" a voice snapped, and I turned to see Faolan striding toward us.

Golden wings flashed in the air as the Little Folk darted to one another, scanning the human servants to figure out who might have a pitcher of water. I guessed none did.

A strained smile cut across Faolan's face. "Thorne," he said. "Perhaps I didn't make myself clear earlier. This afternoon's event is for Sky Court fae only."

Thorne drained the liquid in my glass, then gestured toward Faolan with the empty flute. "To think, Faolan. My father extended you every courtesy while you were at the Forest Court. Treated you as if you were one of our own. It saddens me that the sky prince refuses me even a drink in return."

Faolan's face tightened in anger, his lips pressing into a thin line.

This only seemed to encourage Thorne, however, his grin growing wider. "Not to mention, of course, that I share in the Sky Court magic."

"Whatever unhappy accident caused that abomination—" Faolan snapped before stopping himself. "Possessing some kind of stolen magic does *not* make you a member of this Court."

"But being a stolen woman does?" Thorne quirked an eyebrow, his hazel eyes flicking pointedly to me.

Faolan's mouth opened and closed.

Thorne tutted again. "And how poorly you're treating her, too." He glanced around, taking in the other fae gathered around us. "Based on

who else is here, I'd say you're providing your guests with the finest delicacies the Sky Court has to offer, and yet nothing for Aster to drink."

"Regardless of what she drinks, Aster is *my* champion," Faolan said icily.

"Aster is not *yours*," Thorne said, a rumble like thunder in his voice.

No, it was thunder above us, I realized, tilting my head. Outside, gray clouds swelled around the palace, a cold wind sweeping in and brushing up against the extravagant skirts and shirtsleeves of the assembled sky fae. Several of them followed my glance, wincing as they beheld the approaching storm.

Faolan seemed to notice them looking, his shoulders forcibly releasing. "Now, Thorne," he purred. "I hope you aren't about to lose your temper. You'll remember the rules forbid any champion from harming another outside of the Trials. You threw your ring in, same as the rest of us."

Thorne inclined his head. "I did throw my ring in, Faolan," he said mildly. "But if you'll remember, it was *Aster* who threw in yours." He placed the empty flute on a platter brought in by one of the Little Folk fluttering through the air. "So rest assured, I have no intention of hurting another *champion*…"

Faolan's face paled as he took in the meaning of what Thorne was saying. I was the Sky Court champion, not him.

Thunder echoed through the room, and I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself. Aurora took a step closer, then stepped back again, as though remembering where she was.

Faolan suddenly seemed to notice her too, and his eyes narrowed. "Sister," he snapped. "We've had words before about what happens to fae who get too close to humans."

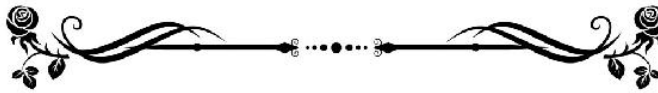
What does that mean?

Turning very pale, Aurora took another step back, her hand flying to her chest. "I was simply trying to offer support to your champion, brother. I thought she looked like she might be getting tired of so much attention on her."

Dipping into a slight curtsey, she turned on her heel and melted back into the crowd of fae.

Faolan turned back to the two of us, irritation flickering across his face. "If my champion's had enough, I'll be happy to escort her back to her room." The corners of his lips curved up. "Actually, now that my sister mentioned it, Aster *is* looking tired. Perhaps it's best she get some rest before the first Trial. In her chambers." He drew himself upright before adding meaningfully, "Where *no one* can disturb her."

Chapter Twelve



I PACED up and down the marble floors of my chambers, my arms wrapped around myself. True to Faolan's word, he'd escorted me right back to my room. With guards positioned outside the door, there was no way for me to leave.

I didn't think I could stand to look at the same glittering golden hearth, dazzling chandelier, or ornately carved pillars any longer. I turned on my heel again, gnawing at my lip. The first Trial was tomorrow, but I had too much anxious energy to sleep.

Giving a heavy sigh, I walked toward the door and pressed an ear against it. I could make out the low murmur of the guards.

I turned around—and yelped, tripping straight over Mosswhistle. The brownie had appeared from nowhere.

I picked myself up, my heart hammering. "*Mosswhistle!*"

"Mistress!" it cried, pressing itself up and dusting down its mossy tunic. The brownie scooped up a small, brown satchel and tucked it under its spindly arm.

"What're you doing here?"

"Mosswhistle moves in with Mistress to protect her from wicked Court Fae."

I watched as Mosswhistle strode across to my dresser and began emptying the contents of its bag into the bottom drawer with a loud clatter. Unlike last time, there were no sooty footprints in its wake. I glanced toward the undisturbed fireplace.

"Wait. How did you get in here, Mosswhistle?"

"Mosswhistle learns new sneaking ways," the brownie cried, closing the drawer with a foot and gesturing wildly with its arms. "The secret human ways behind the walls, no chimney, no flying. Much better to use legs anyway…" The brownie began muttering to itself, and I thought I caught Wispwing's name.

I hushed my voice, conscious of the guards. "You've found a sneaking way out of my room?"

"Yes!" The brownie's talons skittered against the marble floor as it scampered toward the edge of the room. "Here!"

The brownie halted beside a pillar, then suddenly disappeared

from sight.

I blinked. “Mosswhistle?”

“Yes, Mistress?” The brownie popped its head back around the pillar, its hair wild and straggly. I peered behind it, but all I could see was a smooth marble wall.

“How did you…?”

Mosswhistle gave a shrewd smile. “Hard to see, Mistress. But look.” It craned its neck up, standing on tiptoe to indicate a subtle mark on the wall.

My fingers grazed over a small feather engraved in the marble, and when I stood right beside it, I could suddenly see a slim, concealed gap, just large enough for one human body, leading into a dark passageway. My jaw dropped. I’d have never noticed it unless I was standing in this exact spot, at this angle.

“Feather marks the opening to the passages. Otherwise very hidden. Impossible to see!”

I stored that information away as I slipped into the passage after the brownie. Unlike the open-skied, sun-drenched halls I’d gotten used to in the Sky Court, these narrow tunnels were dark and dank, lit by dimly flickering candles.

“Human servants use passageways to travel around the Sky Court,” the brownie called from ahead of me. “Now Mosswhistle, too.”

So there’d been a way out of my room this whole time. I trailed my fingers along the walls to help keep my balance and recoiled. They were damp to the touch.

“And you’re sure you know your way around?” I asked doubtfully, repressing a shudder.

“Yes, yes!” Mosswhistle skipped merrily down some steps at the end of the passageway, apparently unbothered by our increasingly unpleasant surroundings. “Where does Mistress want to go?”

Our footsteps echoed down the spiral staircase. “Can you take me close to Thorne’s rooms?” I decided. Thanks to the rules of the Trials, I wouldn’t be able to go inside, but maybe Mosswhistle could fetch him for me.

The gray steps were cold beneath my boots, my breath misting as goosebumps pricked across the backs of my arms. Whatever magic kept the Sky Court sun-warmed didn’t extend to the servants’ passages.

A mouse scurried across the step in front of me, and I lurched forward, arms wheeling and heart dropping, catching myself on the slimy wall with a grimace.

“Where are we, Mosswhistle?” I called ahead to the brownie, who was now out of sight. “It feels like we've been walking downstairs forever.”

“Don't worry, Mistress, Mosswhistle knows the way!” The brownie’s squeaky voice echoed back up the stairs. “Almost at bottom.”

I wrinkled my nose. There was a horrible smell down here—the air was thick with the odor of yeast and old sweat, tinged with the sharp scent of urine.

Mosswhistle pushed open a door with a shrill, creaking wail.

A vast cellar was revealed beyond. The thin windows were so high up, only the weakest gray slash of dusky light illuminated the quiet space. The shadows were pockmarked with bursts of warmer light from a few candles flickering on the wall, thick dribbles of wax covering the holders.

My eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light, and I realized the quiet space was filled with hundreds of human servants shuffling about as they completed their work despite the late hour. The repetitive clack of knives filled the air, along with the rough, steady hiss of a broom against stone.

“What is this place?” I asked Mosswhistle, uncertainty crawling up my spine.

But the brownie had scurried too far ahead to hear me.

I walked through the cellar and swallowed. A room this big should have been filled with noise and chatter, like the servants’ quarters in Ava's house, but an ominous silence blanketed the room. The ensorcelled servants drifted quietly around, their faces downcast and vacant.

“Come on, Mistress. Catch up!” Mosswhistle’s shrill voice hooted back through the room.

Not one of the servants looked up.

“Mosswhistle, wait. Come back!” I instructed.

I couldn't just ignore the people enslaved here, seeing how many there were, how unwell they looked. Some swept the floor, others polished silver, and yet others washed piles of laundry in huge, steaming vats.

I paused to study the face of each person I passed. There were men and women of every age—although few who looked really old. They went about their duties without noticing me or the other servants.

I reached the far end of the vast cellar, where it turned into a kitchen area, long benches lined with servants dreamily pressing rolling pins over dough, scattering herbs into huge pots simmering over fires, and sorting giant baskets of fruit.

The servant closest to me had his head down, slowly chopping a pile of pears into wafer-thin slices. He was younger than me, barely out of boyhood.

I flinched at the streak of blood across the board. He’d cut himself

and hadn't even noticed.

"Stop!" I grabbed his arm, yanking the knife from his fist. Even though it was empty, his hand continued to make a chopping motion, flecks of dark-red blood dripping to the table.

"Please, stop," I entreated, but he kept moving.

My own hands shaking, I used the knife to cut a strip of cloth from my sleeve, bandaging the boy's hand as best I could while it was still moving. As soon as I finished tying the knot, the boy picked up the knife again and resumed slicing the pears.

I raised my hands to my lips.

In my days as Rosehill's apprentice greenwitch, Sage had told me about the humans she'd seen ensorcelled—put under a powerful fae's spell, leaving them receptive to that particular fae's instructions and deaf to everyone else. They would do anything they were told and be helpless to resist.

People ensorcelled in the Folkwood had stolen babies and replaced them with faerie changelings or attempted to lure others beyond the tree line, all without realizing what they were doing.

It's why I'd always worn my rowan beads while working close to the border.

The beads.

I lifted them over my head and placed them around the servant's neck.

"You can stop now," I whispered to the boy, trying to tilt his chin up to meet my gaze.

Nothing. He carried on chopping.

The beads must only prevent ensorcellment, not cure it once it'd happened.

I reluctantly took the beads back, replacing them around my own neck.

The brownie skidded to a stop beside me, banging into my knees. "Mistress okay?"

I shot it a severe look. "Mosswhistle, don't you notice anything odd about these other humans?"

It shrugged a skinny shoulder. "All humans slow and boring, nothing odd about that. Not Mistress though!" it added quickly, its black, owlish eyes widening as it patted my leg. "Let's leave now. Ugly and dark and dripping down here. Hurry, Mistress."

Mosswhistle tugged at my skirts, and my ears pricked at a loud rasping sound. I took a slow step forward.

"Good, good, this way," Mosswhistle cooed.

I followed the sound, halting when I found the source—a woman intently sweeping the same patch of stone floor.

"Can you hear me?" I waved a hand in front of her face. Her gray-

streaked blonde hair was sweat soaked and plastered close to her scalp.

"Stopping again?" the brownie complained behind me.

"Can't you see she's sick, Mosswhistle?"

The brownie stood at my side. "Sick like sister was sick?" Its voice was quieter now.

"No, Ava was faesick," I explained. Faesickness was different from ensorcellment—the fae had no control over it. Sage hadn't been sure what exactly caused it, other than it usually seemed to happen when someone had been in the proximity of the fae for a time.

"Mistress needs faerie fruit to help, like last time?" the brownie offered, no doubt remembering when it had delivered me the fruit I'd needed to cure my sister. "We go to glasshouses instead?" It pulled at my skirts.

I tugged on a strand of my hair, deep in thought. Perhaps the brownie was onto something…

"You could show me the way to the glasshouses from here?"

The brownie nodded eagerly. "This way, quickly now!"

I took a few slow steps after it. What if the same potion I'd used to cure the faesick girls in Rosehill could be used to cure ensorcellment, too? I could just enchant it slightly differently. There was faerie fruit in the glasshouses... All I needed was to figure out replacements for the woodland plants I'd used in the antidote.

"Let's go to the glasshouses," I agreed. My steps quickened.

I glanced down at the brownie skipping along in its efforts to keep up with my increased pace. "Mosswhistle, will you help me with something?"

"Anything, Mistress."

"When we're all at the first Trial tomorrow, I need you to look for books or journals about plants. Check down here, the glasshouses, the library—I'm sure there's one somewhere—I need you to scour every inch of the Sky Court where there might be books. Can you do that?"

The brownie nodded eagerly. "Mosswhistle will find every book in the Sky Court," it declared, pounding its fist into its upturned palm. "Only…" It turned a sheepish face toward me. "Mosswhistle can't read words."

I gave it a reassuring smile. "To have any hope of identifying these new plants, I need a book with pictures, anyway. Can you look for a book that has lots of drawings of plants in it?"

Mosswhistle nodded firmly, chattering away as we hurried on toward the glasshouses. I might not be able to do much before Mosswhistle found the book I needed, but if the brownie showed me the way now, I'd be able to come back secretly whenever I wanted.

I'd promised Thorne I wouldn't use my enchanting in the Alder

Trials, and I wouldn't. The Trials were about fae politics and a fae king—for me, they would be nothing more than an exercise in survival to pay off my three faerie bargains.

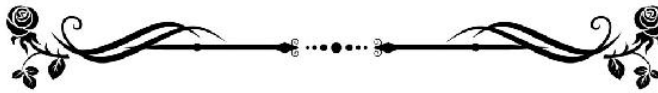
But what went on in the dark underbelly of the Sky Court with these human servants... This was *my* domain, as a human and a greenwitch. This was where I could make a difference with my enchanting.

I cast a look over my shoulder. I had to do *something*. I knew I wouldn't forget the sight of the ensorcelled woman or any of the other people in these dingy servants' quarters for some time...

My hands curled into fists.

I would find a way to free *every* Tithe human Faolan had bound to his Court.

Chapter Thirteen



I STOOD at the very edge of the room, my shoulders hunched. A shiver ran over me, and I wrapped my arms around myself, all too aware of the press of fae magic in the air.

Having summoned all the champions to the armory right before the Alder Trials were due to begin, Faolan was nowhere to be seen. The armory walls had been stripped bare, gleaming white under the dazzling midday sun. In the very center of the room, a glittering, sky-blue sheet of material draped over a large dome on the floor, disguising whatever Faolan had waiting for us.

I didn't know what to worry about more—that Faolan had summoned us here unexpectedly or that the Alder Trials were almost upon us.

Although Thorne had promised he would keep me safe…

We naturally split into our two teams, although Thorne and I stood a little way away from our teammates, some of whom looked distinctly unhappy to have been summoned here with no explanation. On the other side of the armory, Vanna had dark circles under her eyes, her mouth set in a grim frown.

I looked back to my own team members. Morven, the Mountain Court heir, bounced excitedly on the balls of his feet, while Neve, the frost heir, exchanged furtive whispers with Kage, the shadow heir.

As they leaned in, Kage tucking a length of white hair back behind Neve's ear to whisper closer, I wondered what exactly linked their two Courts together. Whether Thorne and I were the only two concerned with someone else's welfare as well as our own in these Trials.

I guessed it made sense. Princes and princesses would surely end up wed to one another. I should probably have been surprised there weren't more couples within the room.

"What do you think is under there?" I whispered, sidling closer to Thorne and gesturing to the domed material. "Do you think this could be part of the Trial?"

"I don't know." He spoke in an undertone. "We're in the armory...so possibly we're expected to choose weapons or armor. But Faolan could have brought us here to throw us off the scent."

I fell silent, turning back to watch the gathered fae. For the moment, at least, I could learn more by watching them than I could by speculating what might lie beneath the sheet of glittering material.

From what I could tell, there seemed to be some sort of alliance between the redheaded sea princess, Sereia, and the blue-haired river princess, Nerida. If they spent much of their lives underwater, perhaps their water-based Courts were linked together somehow. Much like Neve and Kage, they huddled close together, exchanging the occasional hushed word.

The remaining fae seemed to prefer being on their own. Even the Flower Court heir, whom I'd expected to be an ally, kept to themself. I'd seen on the map in the Cursed Court library that the Flower Court sat within the lands of the Forest Court, but Ren had shown little interest in Thorne or any of the others. The slender, androgynous fae perched on a stool like an insect on a flower, hunched over to pull the petals from one of the blooms fringing their tunic so only the top of their short, moss-green hair was visible.

I supposed we *were* on opposite teams...

I drummed my fingers against my crossed arms, my unease growing with every second that ticked past. Typical of Faolan to make us wait like this, to want to make an entrance.

The door slammed open, making me jump.

The rest of the champions didn't react at all. Straightening my back and dropping Thorne's hand so that my arms hung loose at my sides, I lifted my chin before nodding in greeting to Faolan.

He swept past me, not even bothering to acknowledge that I was his champion. He spread his arms, casting his gaze around the others with a genial smile on his face.

My fingers clenched into fists. How could someone who felt so like sunshine be so duplicitous?

"Champions," Faolan announced, swanning into the very center of the room. He halted beside the shrouded dome. "I'm glad to find you all here."

"You hardly gave us much of a choice," snipped Neve. The frost princess shot Faolan a look that would have left me feeling very anxious had she looked at me in that way.

But Faolan's smile didn't waver. His gaze drifted to the dome beside him.

"Come on then, Faolan." Morven rubbed his hands together with a loud clap. "Let's see what you've got in store for us. I take it this is some clue as to what we can expect in the first Trial?"

Faolan shook his head, letting out a tutting noise. "I suppose we don't know each other well, do we, Morven?"

A titter ran around the other fae, as though they too thought

Morven's question had been stupid. I didn't laugh, but I couldn't help agreeing with the others' sentiment. If Morven thought Faolan was about to reveal anything that would lessen the drama and the mystery surrounding the first Trial, he was very much mistaken.

Faolan inclined his head. "I suppose you're not *entirely* wrong…" he said in a voice like melted butter left too long in the sun. "I *have* summoned you here in preparation for the first Trial."

This time, the unease I felt in the room seemed to come as much from the other champions as it did from me.

Faolan lifted a hand, running his fingers gently down the sky-blue material covering the dome. A shimmering light shone out from it, so brightly that I squinted, raising a hand to my brow and flinching back.

When I opened my eyes again, the material had vanished, revealing a selection of weapons—a sword, a bow, an axe. My heart sank as I estimated there must be about ten of them…

Thorne had guessed right.

"Now, I shouldn't want any of you to feel that I'm asking you to enter into the first Trial with nothing to aid you," Faolan said, still in a polite voice, as though we were discussing dinner arrangements. "So I've had the servants sort through every item in this armory and pull out the finest example of each weapon that we own."

Beside me, Thorne's magic swelled, the pressure heavy on my skin.

"Your task is simple," Faolan said. "Each of you, help yourself to one weapon."

With no further explanation and a flutter of his glittering wings, he shot into the air.

I didn't have time to even begin processing what he'd said.

I felt a vacuum in the air beside me as Thorne disappeared, shadowing straight to the center of the room. When I looked up, both he and the shadow prince had already selected a weapon. Thorne clutched a long, silver sword, Kage a sparkling vial of liquid.

Their eyes met, and the shadow prince's lips curved into a cruel smile. Then they disappeared again—just as the others collided.

I took a step back, my heart in my mouth as the djinni from the desert set his whole body alight so that the other fae shrank away from him. I shielded my eyes from the burning flames as he helped himself to a dagger with a long, wavy blade. I could hardly bear to look back at the blur of movement as the others fought for the weapons. The sharp, curved claws that emerged from the flower heir's fingers, tearing into the others' skin. The way in which Morven simply hurled the others out of his path.

In moments, it was over.

I shrank back, my heart beating out an anxious rhythm.

Great start, Aster.

Not only had I failed to choose a weapon, I hadn't even tried.

The dust settled in the middle of the room, revealing the very last object available. A length of thin, silvery rope. I glanced at Thorne, who was already back at my side. “It doesn’t matter,” he murmured. “You don’t need a weapon—my sword is yours.”

Despondent, I headed to the middle of the room on shaking legs and picked it up.

It felt weightless in my hands, as if it wouldn’t bind anything at all.

I frowned. No doubt this looked like some kind of a joke to the others. A loser’s prize for whoever failed to secure one of the more useful weapons. But I knew Faolan better than that. Had he left the rope for me intentionally? Why?

Turning slowly back around, I eyed up the weapons my teammates had secured for themselves. As well as Thorne’s sword and the mysterious bottle Kage had selected, Neve clasped a wickedly sharp spear taller than she was, and Morven wielded a huge hammer. I swallowed. I doubted I’d even be able to lift it, but he swung it casually from his hand.

Their eyes fell to my length of rope, and a hot flush spread up my neck. None of them looked pleased...but they didn't look surprised, either. Neve and Kage exchanged a few more cold words, and the shadow heir laughed.

I glanced over to the other team. Most of them clutched an assortment of impressive blades, while Vanna had won a longbow that she'd already slung across her shoulder, reminding me painfully of my sister Laurel.

A fist clenched in my chest. Had Laurel been here, she wouldn't have hesitated in running for the weapons. And even though she was outmatched in strength by the fae, she probably would have emerged victorious.

My gaze dropped back to the rope in my hands.

“Don’t worry about it,” Thorne murmured from beside me. “You know I’ll protect you.”

I nodded, eyeing the sword in his grasp. But his words did little to settle my nerves. We had no idea what we’d be fighting.

“Excellent.” Faolan clapped his hands together. “What fascinating choices you’ve all made.”

Despite my disappointment with myself, something still bothered me. My chin jerked up, and I tried to meet Faolan’s eye. For someone who had nominated me to be his champion, who surely had a vested interest in me winning, he didn't seem the slightest bit bothered that all I’d come out of his task with was a length of rope.

I bit my lip. *Had* he left it for me on purpose? Thorne had been so sure Faolan would expect me to win by using my enchantment...and

how would a rope help with that?

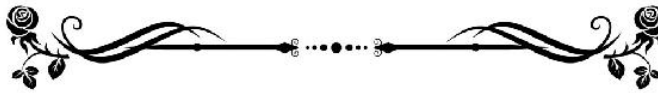
My fingers shifted on the rough, glittering rope, tightening around it. Just in case, I would guard it carefully. I bound the length around my waist.

The blare of horns resounded through the air.

My head snapped to Thorne, fear spiking through my body. The grim set of his face told me enough.

Faolan's smile widened. "And you've made your choices just in time. The Alder Trials are about to begin."

Chapter Fourteen



HEART HAMMERING, I followed close behind Thorne in the procession of champions. We descended the narrow steps chipped out of the solid rock beneath our feet, down through a fine mist of freezing rain that seemed to hang in the air. To one side loomed a greasy black rock face shining with ice; on the other swirled a silvery mist and nothing more. It hadn't taken us long to realize that we must be going down through the clouds that surrounded the Sky Court.

I shivered as a curl of wind wrapped around my shoulders, already cold and damp, and tried not to think about what would happen if I slipped on one of the icy stone steps beneath my feet.

"How much farther do you think it is?" I muttered to Thorne.

"I don't know the Sky Court well." He craned his neck up, looking back up the cliff face. "The palace is built on top of this stack, the tallest in the area. It might be this is the only way of reaching the lower levels within the palace, or it might be—"

He halted as huge branches covered in a fur of green fronds broke through the clouds alongside us.

I gasped, a swell of excitement flickering through my body. This was unlike any tree I'd ever seen in the Folkwood...but it was a tree.

Was Faolan taking us into a forest for the first Trial?

Thorne had said before Faolan would try to make use of the human loophole in the rules to sway the Trials in my favor. It looked like he might have been right. But if Faolan was depending on my enchantment to get our team through this first Trial...we would fail.

I'd promised Thorne I would keep my magic a secret from the other Courts to keep humans across the Kingdom of Faerie safe.

We continued walking down the steps in silence as more of the forest came into view, the emerald-green canopies infused with a clear, fresh scent I didn't recognize. "What are these called?"

"These are pine trees," Thorne replied. "They grow in very cold climates. We have them in the north of the Forest Court, too."

I looked at the cloud-wreathed pines with interest, the strange needles growing from the branches shining a vibrant green, and breathed in another deep lungful of the air.

It might not be the familiar scent of the Folkwood, and I might be hiding my enchantments. But if the first Trial were to take place within a woodland, at least I wouldn't be completely out of my comfort zone.

We emerged beneath the thick layer of clouds, then at last reached the bottom of the steps. The stone wound away from us, a dark path leading out through the trees. A tingling flickered in my palms—the urge to cast an enchantment, to draw on the power of the plants that surrounded me.

My steps faltered, the sensation surprising me. It had been such little time, really, that I'd been casting enchantments, yet already I found myself longing to use that power.

To my surprise, Faolan veered off the path, walking around the sheer face of black rock shining dully in the low light of the forest. The muttering of the other fae heirs grew louder as we followed him around.

At last, he stopped.

I stared. Two long, thin chests sat side by side, one covered in a delicate pattern of stars, the other with a glittering sun emblazoned on its lid. I breathed in a metallic smell, stronger than the scent of the forest. It was hot and cold at the same time, and I could almost taste it on my tongue—similar to how fae magic smelled to me.

Yet as I glanced around, the other heirs' faces had paled, their jaws set.

Vanna let out a low hiss of breath through her teeth.

"Is it..?"

"Iron," Thorne confirmed, his face grim.

I returned my gaze to the chest, interested. Was this how Faolan thought I might win? Iron was one of the few weaknesses of the fae predators around me. Even just brushing against it would cause them pain—would prevent them from using their magic.

A cruel smile cut across Faolan's face. "Welcome to the first of the Alder Trials."

His voice echoed around us, magnified by the wind.

For whose benefit was this? Was his booming voice simply to startle us, or were there other fae watching—members of the Sky Court who thought this was some kind of entertainment?

I glanced up, my gaze scanning the clouds for hidden spectators.

Faolan gestured to the two chests. "You've already been assigned to your teams. Now, the first Trial is simple. All you have to do is collect the key that will unlock your chest." His smile widened. "Inside you'll find something that you might find useful in the second Trial. Of course, only the team who unlocks their chest will make it through."

I supposed that was something. If the key was made of iron, I could touch it without burning myself—perhaps be of use in that way.

The rest of them twisted about, shooting wary looks into the dark forest. The thick cloud cast the forest in a dull gloom, the shadows between the trees dark and threatening.

Would that be the first Trial? To seek out the keys somewhere in the forest that surrounded the Sky Court? Then there were the weapons from the armory… Maybe we'd have to fight something for a key? My fingers trailed the mysterious rope tied around my waist.

"Come on, then, Faolan," Morven called, the Mountain Court heir once again apparently oblivious to the air of drama Faolan was keen to create. "Tell us what we must do."

Faolan didn't seem to mind Morven's questioning this time, though.

The satisfied expression on his face sent a chill running down my spine.

"Ah, yes," he purred. "The keys. You'll find them up there." He pointed up the glistening, black stack of rock.

My thoughts slowed, the blood not running through my veins as it should.

"If you look closely enough, you'll see there are two flags. You'll find the keys to your chests there..."

I squinted into the sleet still falling above us. I could *just* about make out what looked like two rippling flags. No doubt one was covered in stars, one with a sun, matching the twin chests by Faolan.

"That's it?" Neve snapped, frost prickling up her fingers. "We just have to collect the keys?"

The same hunting horns that we'd heard in the armory sounded once, then twice.

"You may begin," Faolan declared.

Without pausing to confer with their team, the flower heir, Ren, flew immediately upward, wings a greenish blur as they shot up to the flag like a loosed arrow.

I froze, horrified.

Surely the sun team couldn't win so easily, just because a member of their team had wings...

My head jerked back to look at Thorne, suddenly realizing he could have simply shadowed up to where the key was hidden beneath the flag protruding from the rock.

But he remained perfectly still beside me, squinting up in the direction of the flower heir, one hand resting on Kage's arm. The shadow prince looked deeply affronted to have been given such a warning, his face a mask of anger, but he remained standing beside Thorne, staring hard after Ren.

I looked back up, a frown crossing my features. Ren should have returned by now, triumphant, the key in hand.

"Oh, yes," Faolan said warmly. "I should have mentioned. Around each of the flags, there's a bubble of magic. Once you cross the line, I'm afraid there's no crossing back out of it again."

Angry murmurs sounded from the opposing team, while Kage gave Thorne a slight nod.

"It's Faolan," Thorne muttered under his breath to the other heir. "Nothing is ever simple with Faolan."

I loosed a breath. *Thank Folk*. If Thorne and Kage had shadowed up there and gotten stuck behind the magic line, there'd be no hope of our team ever winning. Not to mention I'd be left without Thorne to protect me. And now that the Trial had begun, the magic preventing the champions from harming one another had been lifted. I took a small step closer to Thorne's side.

Faolan reached out one elegant hand, examining his fingernails. "If I were you," he said, "I wouldn't be trying to bring the key down here…"

Neve glared at him, frost ruffling in the air around her clenched fists. "You mean to say *we* have to carry the chest up *there*?"

Faolan tutted. "I've already—*generously*—given you more information than I had to." He gave a bright smile. "I'll leave you with that tip. Good luck!"

He shot upward in a flutter of golden wings.

I stared after him, my stomach tight, recalling in horror the greasy-looking, iced rock we had passed as we'd descended the steps. Even just climbing up it would be difficult enough. Lugging a heavy chest behind us, it would be impossible.

Anxiety bubbled through me as I turned to Thorne. "Can you or Kage shadow the chest up to the key?"

He shook his head. "Afraid not, petal. It's iron, so immune to our magic."

I cut a glance to the rest of our team. Neve and Kage were exchanging hushed whispers again, while Morven simply stared in the direction Faolan had disappeared.

"We're supposed to work as a team," Thorne barked, making Neve and Kage jump. "Whatever thoughts you have to share, share them with all of us."

"I have a thought to share," Morven boomed. "I think you're wrong, Thorne. What you said before, about Faolan. I think this *is* simple. This is a test of strength."

I stared at him in disbelief.

He nodded his head emphatically. "Faolan means us to get the chest up this cliff face. I say with our combined strength, we can do

it." He rubbed his hands together. "And we already have an advantage. With Ren gone, the other team is one member down."

Neve made a loud scoffing noise. "An advantage? I'd say we just evened the odds." Her gaze slid to me, cold and furious. "Whatever Faolan's reasons for entering a human into the Alder Trials, she's useless to us in this challenge."

With a sinking feeling, I realized she was right. I wouldn't be able to contribute anything at all to this challenge if it involved dragging the chest up the cliff face.

"We could always leave her down here," Kage said smoothly, his voice slick like oil on water.

I looked unhappily at my feet. I didn't want to be left at the bottom of the stack while the others all climbed it. But since I could contribute nothing, I hardly felt I could protest.

"No," Thorne said sharply. "Aster comes with us."

Neve rolled her eyes. "We're a team, you say, and yet already, Thorne, I don't think you're thinking about this in terms of what would be best for all of us. Your human mate is nothing more than an extra weight for us to carry along with the iron chest."

My cheeks burned, fierce words searing the tip of my tongue.

I forced them back.

"I'll carry her," Thorne insisted. "She'll be no burden to the rest of you."

"If we're to beat the sun team, we'll need every ounce of your strength," hissed Kage.

"It's not up for debate," Thorne countered. "I climb with Aster, or I don't climb at all."

I glanced to our right. The other team had obviously had the same idea as us. And while we'd been arguing, they had manufactured a kind of glove for their chest out of their cloaks so that they could carry it without being burned. Already, they'd maneuvered it to the base of the cliff and were ready to begin their ascent.

"Move it, all of you," Morven roared. "The Mountain Court will *not* be defeated in a test of strength!"

Ripping the cloak from his back, he flung it over the chest, securing the four corners in a similar arrangement to the sun team's efforts to prevent the iron from burning them.

"Bring her with you, Thorne, leave her here, I don't care." Morven's fingers flew over the knots. "What's the weight of one human? She's insignificant."

My insides tightened at his words, and once again, a tingle spread through my palms. With the forest behind me, it was so tempting to use my powers, to show them that I wasn't nearly as useless as they thought. Morven's carelessly cruel words were somehow upsetting me

more than Neve's and Kage's deliberate digging. He saw me as nothing more than an *inconvenience*.

But I'd promised Thorne. And this was for the safety of humans everywhere. I clenched my hands into fists, trying to force the feeling down. It was important none of these other Courts discovered what I was, even if that meant appearing useless.

Thorne turned to me appraisingly. "Do you think you can hold on to my back?"

Biting back my frustration and my embarrassment, I nodded.

Thorne met my eyes. For a moment, I could see in his expression how much he hated to see me pretending to be powerless, too. Then, in a flash, he had joined Morven, helping him to secure the cloak around the chest and dragging it over to the foot of the cliff face. Neve and Kage appeared beside them in a moment.

Numbly, I trailed behind them. There was a kind of grace, a fluidity to the way they worked together. Like a flock of birds wheeling in the sky or bees humming around a hive. There was no question I was the odd one out here.

I glanced back to where the other team was inching their way up the cliffs.

"Aster," Thorne called, and I snapped my head back. The others were looking at me impatiently, ready to go.

You have nothing to prove to these fae.

Pressing down the frustration in my chest, I moved to Thorne's side. He dropped down slightly, and I jumped up onto his back, wrapping my legs around his waist. His muscled body was hard and lithe beneath mine as he moved closer to the cliff, ready to support the chest from beneath it.

I slid my arms around his neck. "Is that okay?" I hated the taste of the question on my tongue.

"Don't worry about me, petal. Just don't let go."

I looked dubiously at the shining rock face, slick with the sleet that pattered down from the cloud above us. I tentatively reached for the rock, one arm still wrapped around Thorne. It was ice-cold beneath my fingertips, slippery. I had never seen anything like this in the Folkwood. And I knew very well I wouldn't be able to climb up it, let alone to haul the heavy chest up behind me.

Silver bells, was this really what Faolan had expected from his champion? It seemed doubtful.

The sky above me lurched as Thorne began to climb, knocking all thoughts of Faolan from my mind. The muscles hardened around his back, his neck, and his shoulders strained as he clung to the cliff face with one hand, the other supporting the chest above us.

The strongest on our team had split up, with Thorne pushing the

chest ahead of him and the mountain heir climbing on ahead, the chest fastened to him using someone's belt. As he strained ahead, pulling us upward, Neve and Kage supported the chest from either side, using one hand to grip onto the wall, one to push the chest.

Thorne slipped, and one leg swung out from the cliff face. My stomach lurched, my legs tightening around his middle.

"Careful, Thorne," Neve panted, her narrowed eyes sliding to me. "If he's distracted because of you…" she hissed, leaving the threat unfinished.

Thorne at last found a foothold. "I'm not distracted," he grunted. "I'm—"

He didn't have a chance to finish.

To his left, Kage slipped, his boots scraping across the stone as he slid back down the cliff face several feet. One side of the chest dropped, and Thorne heaved upward, his limbs trembling beneath my fingers as he struggled to hold the additional weight.

In the blink of an eye, Kage reappeared back beside us, shadowing up again to his side of the chest, his pale cheeks tinged pink.

"How about you keep a closer eye on that slippery mate of yours instead of Aster and me?" Thorne panted out.

Neve shot him a glare.

Then a shriek sounded from where the other team had climbed ahead of us.

My heart leaped into my mouth as I watched them slipping back down the rock.

"It's hopeless," I muttered. "This is a hopeless task."

"It's *meant* to be difficult," Kage said snidely. "These Trials are to choose the next Alder King or Queen of Faerie. Did you think it would be easy?"

I didn't reply. Of course I hadn't expected it to be easy... But what did this prove about anyone's ability to rule a kingdom?

Kage's lips curled. "Folk save us the day a human wins the Alder Trials."

Neve laughed. "I hardly think we need to worry about that." They both looked down at me again, twin sneers across their faces.

"Careful, Neve," Thorne said in a frozen voice.

"All of you," Morven barked from ahead of us, "Can you please just __"

I let out a shriek as the rock face fell away, my stomach dropping with it. All of us slid down.

Thorne hissed as his fingertips dug into the rock. Even Kage and Neve looked panicked, scrabbling at the stone.

We slowed.

And finally halted.

My heart hammered as we clung to the side of the rock like lichen around a tree. For a moment, none of us spoke.

I could hardly breathe.

This is hopeless. The thought ran through my head again.

It wasn't just that this seemed like an impossible task. It seemed so...*unlike* Faolan to pick *this* as his choice for the first Trial. Something so simple. I glanced over to where the other team was still inching up the cliff face, making up some of their lost ground again.

“A test of strength…” I mumbled, shaking my head, before adding more loudly, “There *must* be a better way than this...”

My eyes snagged on the huge hammer Morven had strapped to his back, the weapon he’d chosen to aid him in this task.

I frowned. It seemed odd for Faolan to have requested we choose weapons if he didn’t mean us to use them…

“The weapons,” I muttered. Would it be possible to hammer out some kind of handholds using Morven’s choice? I raised my voice. “Can we use the weapons in some way?”

“Finally,” Neve said in a cold, furious voice. “The human speaks some sense.”

She pulled her spear from where it rested across her back, weighing it in her hand.

From where her fingers wrapped around its middle, ice spread along it lengthways, the air around her humming with a raw, frozen energy.

I bit my lip. I supposed that, enhanced with Neve’s magic, the spear might—

Turning away from the rest of us, Neve hurled the spear in the direction of the other champions.

I watched in horror as it sliced through the air before crashing into the rock face above the sun team.

Chapter Fifteen



THE SUN TEAM tumbled like dead leaves from a tree.

They plunged through the air for a matter of seconds before they crashed into the ground, the aftershock tremoring through the clearing.

The strength flooded out of my limbs. I couldn't bear to look and see what had happened. And yet I couldn't seem to tear my eyes from the rising cloud of dust and snow.

A scream split the air, and I flinched back, my chest constricting, squeezing my arms tighter around Thorne's shoulders as I waited with dreadful anticipation.

Vanna. Did she survive?

The screams turned into violent sobs. A female's, I thought. Nausea rose in my chest.

None of the others said a word.

Slowly, the scene below came into view.

The iron chest was embedded in the ground, the cloak around it shredded by splinters of Neve's ice. Beneath it, I could see one pale arm, extended like a bone.

Bile burned the back of my throat.

Whoever was trapped beneath the chest had to be dead.

I caught sight of Vanna and shuddered with relief. Thank Folk it wasn't her.

Another screamed sob rang through the air, and then the sea princess, Sereia, leaped to her feet. Her eyes found Neve's, a look of such pure hatred emanating from her that I half-expected the frost heir to flinch back. Instead, Neve looked down with an expression that was almost bored.

My eyes scanned the rest of the sun team.

Ren, the flower heir, was still trapped behind the magic veil Faolan had placed around the sun flag. Sereia stared furiously up at us, as Badriyah, the heir to the Desert Court, rose on shaking feet.

It was Nerida, then, the blue-haired heir to the River Court, who had been crushed beneath the weight of the iron chest.

My gaze slid back to Sereia. I'd thought previously that there was

some closeness between the two girls from the water courts. No wonder that the air around her seemed charged. The mist, the sleet, even the frozen water that had been clinging to the rockface rose like steam, swirling around her clenched fists.

Something in the still-functioning part of my mind clicked into place. *That* was how they'd made such better progress up the cliffs. Between the sea princess, the river princess, and the fiery desert prince, they'd have been able to dry the rocks as they went.

"Excellent," Kage purred. "Just the advantage we needed."

To my horror, he and Neve had already positioned themselves ready to continue our climb, looking across at the other team to gauge whether they would retaliate. But the sea princess had crumpled with grief, while Vanna and Badriyah seemed to be having some kind of argument, the metal princess clutching her bow tightly and shaking her head.

"That's not what I meant when I said to use our weapons," I half-shouted, my voice shaking slightly.

Morven looked troubled. "It's a test of strength," he mumbled. "But it's not a test of strength if you just…" His eyes flicked to where Neve's spear had collided with the cliff face, a smattering of ice and snow still covering a deep hole gouged out of the rock.

"I gave us the advantage we needed," Neve said sharply. "Don't waste it, Morven."

My fingers pinched at Thorne, silently begging him not to think the same way as the other fae heirs.

He stared down at the crushed river princess below, the grief of the sea princess beside her, and the defeated looks of Vanna and Badriyah. Victory was impossible for them now—unless they tried to take out one of our team, to even the odds.

I craned my neck back. Looking up at the sheer rock ahead of us, this task seemed impossible for us even with all of our team members.

"This can't be it," I said out loud, frowning. "I just don't believe it's as simple as this."

"You said it yourself," Kage snapped. "Faolan must have given us these weapons for something."

"Yes," I bleated, panic searing through me as I considered perhaps I might have some part in this. That Neve would never have thrown the spear if it weren't for my suggestion. "But I was imagining using the weapons to carve footholds or—or something."

Neve snorted. "You think that sounds any cleverer? More like Faolan?"

My brow furrowed. It didn't. And yet it still seemed improbable to me that Faolan intended us to win the first Trial just by climbing up this cliff face.

“We're not going to make it up there like this,” I insisted. “We get a few feet up and then we slide right back down again.”

Neve let out a frustrated growl. “The other team’s out of the running,” she snapped. “So I say we keep climbing, no matter how long it takes. Morven?” She looked up at the Mountain Court heir, who still hadn’t moved.

My frown deepened. I was missing something…I was sure of it.

Faolan’s satisfied smile as I’d selected the rope flashed through my mind, and I put one hand to the length of it fastened around my waist.

My eyes flicked from the sword at Thorne’s waist to the hammer strapped to Morven’s back.

A plan began to take shape.

“I—”

I was cut off as we slid back down a few feet farther, my stomach turning as we shuddered down the side of the rock.

“I've got an idea!” I gasped out the moment we came to a stop. “If we just go back down to the bottom of the cliff—”

“*Back down*?” Kage repeated. “Hollow hills, Thorne, if you don't control your irondamned human plaything—”

“I do not *control* Aster,” Thorne said in a smooth, terrifying voice. “And you will watch your tongue if you want to keep it.”

Thorne stopped moving, tilting his head back toward me in an indication that he was listening. “Tell me your idea.”

“I don’t think all of us need to go up there with the chest.” I pointed upward. “With my rope, your sword and Morven’s hammer, we can rig up a pulley system. It'll be easier than trying to jack the chest up with us. We can do it from the ground.”

“A pulley system?” Thorne sounded confused.

“It’s—it's a kind of Craft,” I improvised. “If you use Morven's hammer to fix your sword into the cliff face, and we sling the rope over the hilt, we can tie one end around the chest. Then the rest of you would pull on the other end, lifting the chest into the air.”

Neve snorted. A sentiment that seemed to be echoed by both Kage, whose lips lifted into a sneer, and Morven, who began climbing again, placing one hand above the other.

“This is a test of *strength*,” the mountain heir repeated doggedly.

I bit down my frustration. “Look, we can keep climbing up a few feet and sliding right back down again until we're all exhausted. Or you can listen to me now—”

“Aster,” Thorne interrupted, “You don't need to convince me. I trust you.”

Fleeting gratitude was quickly replaced by a flicker of alarm as I felt his muscles tense.

Then Thorne hurled himself backward off the wall, and me with

him.

A shriek escaped my lips as we hung suspended in the air before reappearing back at the bottom of the cliff face.

Of course. He'd shadowed us down.

I slid down from his back onto shaking legs, then snapped my head back up again. Morven still clung to the wall, his limbs trembling, his determination not to let go evident in the bunching of his muscles.

Neve and Kage continued trying to climb on, but a few moments later, they exchanged a look.

Kage disappeared in a curl of black smoke just as Neve leaped backward, thudding down to land in a neat crouch on the earth. The shadow heir immediately reappeared beside her.

Morven began sliding down the rock face, still bellowing, his anguished, furious roars filling the air.

Thorne shifted protectively in front of me. "I hope this works, Aster," he muttered, staring up at Morven.

"You'll need to hammer the sword into the rock up there," I told him, lifting my arm and gesturing upward. "Above Faolan's bubble of magic, so the rope falls down through it."

"I'm not leaving your side." He watched our teammates warily.

"You need to," I pressed.

The moment Morven's feet touched the ground, Thorne shadowed straight to him, snatching the hammer from his back. I reached my hands down to my waist and found my rope missing.

When did he even take that?

Then, in a whisper of darkness, Thorne disappeared. From high above us, a boom sounded through the air, the whole stack groaning as he used the hammer to bash the sword deep into the rock face.

Two coils of silvery rope dropped down beside us, before Thorne shadowed back to my side. The whole thing had taken him seconds.

"Okay, Aster." He took a swift step to my side, eyes bright. "What now?"

My hand shaking, I pointed to one end of the rope. "We use this to secure the chest."

Thorne moved without hesitation, then stopped, glaring at the others. "You heard her."

Neve and Kage exchanged a look, then took a pointed step back.

"Winning the first Trial with the help of a human is no victory at all," Neve snarled.

Thorne turned to Morven. Rage was still etched upon the hulking male's face, but he appeared to have regained control of himself. Silently, he joined Thorne, helping him arrange the ropes around the chest. I moved closer, tying the knots tightly.

Satisfied that the chest was secure, I stepped back.

“Someone needs to go up with it,” I explained. “To use the key.”

Morven fixed me with a cold stare. “This is your plan,” he said, reaching for the other end of the rope. “You will see it through.”

“She’ll do nothing of the sort,” Thorne interjected, squaring up to Morven. “She goes nowhere without me.”

My mind whirled. I didn’t want to leave Thorne’s protection, but Morven was right. It made sense for me to do it.

“I’ll go,” I said, pushing past the bristling males. “I’m the only one who can comfortably be that close to iron, and we need your strength to pull the chest up from the ground.” Uneasily, I slipped on top of the chest. I tried to keep my expression neutral. I didn’t want to give away how difficult I found heights.

Thorne appeared at my side. “Aster, you don’t have to—”

“I do,” I replied. “And you have to trust me.”

He looked torn. He knew it made sense, too. “I trust you,” Thorne conceded. “But if there’s any problem, I'll come straight for you. If you fall, I’ll catch you.”

I nodded, my hands clasping the rope, the cold of the chest biting into my behind as I sat down.

“Now, it's simple,” I instructed with a watery smile. “You and the others just need to haul on the other end of the rope.”

An expression of wonder passed over Thorne’s face. “Brilliant,” he murmured, “lifting the chest up.”

I gave him a half-smile, trying not to think about how high up I was about to go.

“Enough sweet talk,” Morven barked, standing by the other end of the rope. “Let's do this. If it doesn't work, I want us back on that cliff face as soon as possible.”

Neve and Kage still stood side by side, arms crossed, refusing to engage. I hoped that Thorne’s power from the Mountain Court meant he shared some of Morven’s incredible strength. That they wouldn't drop me.

The rope stirred, the chest creaking as the two of them began heaving it up, and a moment later, I swung into the air.

I closed my eyes, my stomach dropping as I felt myself lifted higher, the chest swaying precariously. My stomach churned, my insides like liquid.

I clutched the rope, my fingers numb.

All I have to do is hold—

The chest crashed into the cliffs, shuddering along the rockface.

Silver bells. I hadn't thought about this when I’d suggested my plan. The chest groaned against the rock before swinging away again, lifting me higher.

Forcing myself to open my eyes, I tilted my head back. I could

already make out the star-studded flag, encased within a shimmering bubble of magic. To the right, I could see Ren, the flower heir, still sitting despondently on the rocky platform within the second bubble, twirling a key between their fingers. Spotting me, the faery gave a wicked smile and waggled their fingers.

The shimmering veil grew closer. As I passed through it, a rush of warmth spread through my body, the taste of metal sharp on my tongue. Inside the bubble, there was no wind ruffling my skin, and the scent of pine vanished.

I loosed a breath and turned my attention to the flag. It was set above an archway in the rock, a platform big enough to stand on beneath it, and my gaze roved farther up to a sea of astonished fae faces.

Anger stirred within me. They'd been watching us like some kind of spectator sport.

The chest stopped moving as soon as it was level with the rock platform. Trying my hardest to ignore the shake of my limbs, the way in which my legs seemed to have no strength in them at all after my perilous ascent up the cliffs, I forced myself to slide from the chest onto the platform, holding tightly onto the rope until my feet met with rock beneath them.

I let out a shaky breath.

To think, this had only been the first Trial.

I looked around. A long, slim key hung from the wall, and snatching it down, I hurried back to the chest, still hanging in front of the platform. Inserting the key into the lock, I turned it with a click.

Taking one last steadying breath to calm myself, I reached back out over the cliff face and heaved open the chest lid.

A polite smattering of applause sounded behind me as the horns blared out again.

I blinked.

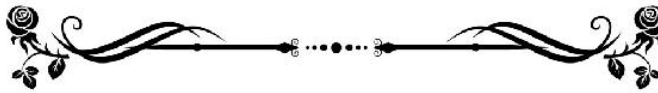
I didn't know what I'd expected to find inside the chest after Faolan had said it would help us with the second Trial.

But I hadn't suspected something as simple as this.

Five wooden poles that ended in flat paddles slotted neatly together inside.

Oars.

Chapter Sixteen



I CLUTCHED my knife and fork, the perfectly wrought gold smooth beneath my palms, the edges digging into my skin. Before me, my plate was laden with the finest fae delicacies—slivers of golden beets, the petals of a pale-pink flower I didn't recognize, a heavy, fruit-laden sauce. Hundreds of candles lit the table, surrounded by pretty vases containing flowers of Sky Court blue.

In spite of the beauty, nausea rose in my chest, my stomach twisting. I determinedly kept my gaze on the plate of food. If I looked up, I would see two empty places opposite me. Where the river princess, Nerida, should have been seated with the sea princess, Sereia, beside her.

Two friends, commiserating over their loss in the first Trial, perhaps discussing who they thought would win the next. Who would lose. Not…

I placed a hand on my stomach as it heaved.

Not one heir *crushed*, the other having locked herself in her rooms for the rest of the day to face her grief alone.

I clenched my cutlery tighter. I had known the fae were dangerous. Had known that these Alder Trials, designed to choose the next King or Queen of Faerie, would not be easy. Thorne had explained the rules —that fae could kill each other within the Trials.

But such a needless, casual death... If I looked away from the empty seats opposite me, my nausea only grew worse as the other heirs tucked into their food. The mood was somber, but still they exchanged pleasantries, commiserations, discussions about all that had happened in today's Trial. I drew in a long, slow, shallow breath through my nose.

I didn't think I would ever get used to it. How different these fae were. How little they cared for life.

Perhaps none of them apart from Sereia had known the river heir well, but they would have known Nerida more than I did. And I felt her absence like a heavy shroud around my shoulders, a compression of my chest, a stinging around my eyes. With her near-immortal lifespan, she should have lived for hundreds more years.

Surely they must regret such an unnecessary death?

I turned my head slowly, my gaze fixing on the golden-haired fae lounging at the very end of the table.

Faolan, I noticed, had touched little of the food either, his attention instead on the champions gathered around the table. A smile played around the corners of his mouth, his sky-blue eyes missing nothing as the gathered heirs exchanged confidences with one another.

As Faolan caught my eye, his lips lifted higher. He raised the golden goblet beside his plate, tilting it as if in a toast.

My expression froze. Of course, as far as the sky prince was concerned, his champion was the true winner at the first Trial. It was me who had figured out how to get the chest up the rock face. It was me the fae spectators had seen rising up on top of the chest, emerging beside the star-covered flag to retrieve the key and secure my team's victory in the first Trial.

Had that been his plan all along? That I would win the challenge using human Craft rather than my enchanting?

A hiss escaped through my teeth, but it only seemed to please Faolan further.

He got to his feet, the chair scraping back with a squeal over the floor, and a hush fell across the table, the others turning to face him.

"A toast," he proposed, "to the star team, and to my champion." He lifted his goblet even higher, his lips twisting as he took in my discomfort.

He talked as if I belonged to him, like I was his possession. We might be bound by our bargains, but I was still my own person.

I refused to reach for my goblet or to drop my gaze, glaring at him. I could sense the unease spreading between the other heirs, none of them wanting to raise a glass to me. Thorne and Vanna stiffened on either side of me, neither wanting to indulge Faolan.

Never mind the fact that it should have been Nerida's memory we were toasting. A bereavement, not my measly success. I considered standing, making the toast myself, but Faolan continued before I could move.

"Of course…" Faolan drained the rest of his glass before continuing brightly, "that brings us to the happy matter of the second Trial."

The dissent that had spread through the room when Faolan had raised his glass to me faded, curiosity changing the atmosphere.

"Thanks to Aster," Faolan said, "you caught a glimpse of what the second Trial might involve."

My mind returned to the oars, and I swallowed, fear coursing through me now as well as outrage. If the second Trial involved a boat… Well, Faolan had seen for himself that I was no rower. I racked

my brains. Had I told him that I couldn't swim when he'd rescued me from the kelpie? Even though I'd had a swimming lesson with Thorne since, water was not my strong suit.

"I'm afraid I can't bring myself to tell you too much about it all yet," Faolan said, "but I can tell you that you have until next week before it commences. Until just before Winter Solstice."

I stiffened. I'd lost so much time in pixie-dust-induced sleep. How were we so close to the Winter Solstice already? My thoughts returned unhappily to Rosehill, to my father and my sisters. They would celebrate along with the rest of the town with feasting, fires, music, and hot cider until the sun rose.

They had no idea that Thorne had found me like he'd promised them.

Never in a million years could they have guessed I was here, competing alongside the heirs to all the Fae Courts. Numbly, I lifted my fork, hardly tasting the exquisite flavors that danced across my tongue.

"Only three champions will proceed to the final Trial," Faolan explained.

The rest of us waited, assuming Faolan would divulge more about what was yet to come.

But with a slight flutter of his glittering wings, he returned to his seat at the table, picking up his knife and fork as though he hadn't spoken at all.

My gaze slowly roamed the other champions who had been on my team. Only three would make it through the next Trial. That meant two would lose...

Neve and Kage still sat side by side, shooting Faolan a wintry, furious look that would have chilled me to my bones.

Morven had dropped his head into one hand, looking thoughtful. He wore a fur pelt wrapped around his broad shoulders and a long necklace that seemed to be made of sharp, white teeth. I wondered if he would use his shape-shifting magic in the next Trial...

Finally, I allowed myself to turn toward Thorne.

My chest cracked as I caught him staring toward Nerida's vacant chair, his handsome brow furrowed and hazel eyes distant.

"Oh, wipe that look off your face, forest prince," Kage drawled, lifting two feet onto the table in a gesture that reminded me of how Thorne had been when I'd first met him in the Cursed Court.

He leaned back on his chair, raising his hands behind his head. Wicked laughter danced behind his eyes. "I suppose you have been away from the Forest Court for a while," he said, "but you know how it's done. You know what's involved in these Trials. Someone *always* dies."

Thorne snapped his gaze back to the shadow heir, a hardness forming behind his eyes. “Forgive me, Kage,” he said in a smooth voice. “You misunderstand. I'm not grieving the loss of a champion, but rather which one…”

Fury swept across Kage’s features.

Neve let out an exclamation. “I think I'm done with this meal.” Lifting her plate slowly, she tilted it over the floor so that the remnants of her food slid down, slopping onto the marble. “But it seems a shame to waste such good food,” she purred, her eyes finding mine. “Let the dogs have it.”

The moment she snapped her fingers, the servants clustered around the edge of the room rushed forward, eyes bright with a feverish excitement.

I went stock-still, disbelief sweeping through me. She wouldn't…

“Eat it,” she instructed. “Like the animals you are.”

The servants dropped to their hands and knees, lapping up the leftover food, not even using their hands to pick it up but eating straight off the floor.

I slammed my hands on the table, shooting to my feet. My gaze slid to the vases of pale-blue flowers. I didn’t recognize them, had no idea what they could do, but still…

Neve’s lip curled up. “I’d invite you to join, human, if only you’d take those beads off your neck…”

My heart leaped as she referenced the string of rowan beads Thorne had given me, my hand instinctively darting to where they were concealed beneath the fine Sky Court fashions Faolan had clad me in.

The frost princess dropped her plate with a clatter on top of the humans bundled around her feet. “If not for those berries, you'd be enjoying this too. Same as the rest of them.”

Thorne jolted to his feet with a growl at the same time my hand shot for the vase of flowers on the table, finding a stem. Sharp thorns dug into my skin, but I barely seemed to notice as a spike of white-hot rage flooded through me.

“*Aster.*” A hissed voice came from beside me.

But it wasn't Thorne’s.

To my left, Vanna had also risen to her feet, her hand going to my arm.

My grip on the flower released slightly, and it fell to the table along with hot, fresh drops of my blood.

Thorne stood at my other side, breathing heavily, shadows curling from him. Vanna cast an imperious gaze around the table.

“For once I quite agree with Neve. I’m done with my meal too,” she said. “This conversation leaves me with little appetite. I think

Aster and I will retire for the evening."

Taking a firm grip of my arm, she gave Thorne a small nod and steered me away from the table and out of the room.



Cold marble seeped into my back, cooling the fury that still swept over me in waves.

The casual, cruel way that Neve had treated the human servants… Not even servants of her own Court, but of the Sky Court...and she'd made it pretty clear she thought I belonged down there on the floor with them.

And none of the others had done anything to interject, to stop her from treating the human servants like the dogs she'd proclaimed them to be. Thorne and Vanna had only stepped in to protect me, not the other humans.

My fists bunched in the gauzy, flowing material of my skirts, my knees inching closer to my chest.

My gaze swept to Vanna at the edge of the balcony, her long legs dangling over the side and head tilted back to admire the colors of dusk, the setting sun painting the clouds in pastel shades of rose, gold, and lilac.

As my rage subsided slightly, I wondered what had prompted her to bring me out here. Whether she knew that I'd been intending to cast an impulsive enchantment, or whether she'd thought removing me from the situation might stop Thorne from doing something he regretted.

Either way, I was grateful to her. I blew out a breath. If she hadn't intervened, I knew full well I'd been about to break my promise to Thorne and use my enchanting in front of everyone. I hadn't even formulated exactly what I wanted the flower to do, but I'd been so intent upon punishing Neve, and the instinct to reach for my new magic was already stronger than any of the habits I'd developed throughout my time as a greenwitch.

I supposed my emotions had been running high, but it frightened me that I'd so easily lost control.

My gaze lingered on the golden tattoo swirling up Vanna's back, the twining plants I'd seen when she'd visited the Cursed Court.

"Why is your tattoo a Forest Court motif?"

Vanna twisted to look at me. Her expression was hard, almost calculating. With a swish and tinkle of her metal-laced dress, she moved from her seat perched on the edge of the balcony and sank down beside me.

The metal lining her shoulders clunked back against the marble

wall. “My betrothed—my mate—was from the Forest Court. Gael. He was with Thorne and the others when…”

When they’d chased down the enchantress’s daughter, Eila.

That meant Vanna’s betrothed had been one of Thorne’s best friends. And that Thorne had killed him...

When I’d first met Vanna, I’d been jealous of her. I’d worried that there was more than friendship between her and Thorne. But now discovering the truth of their relationship...I didn’t feel relieved; I just felt guilty.

I winced. “I’m so sorry. Thorne never mentioned…” I trailed off, and we fell into silence, watching the evening clouds drift past. “I think your tattoo is a beautiful memorial,” I added after a few moments.

Vanna twisted the golden rings on her finger. “Tattoos aren’t common in Faerie, not as adornment. They’re seen as markers of ill-will and curses.”

“Like Thorne’s,” I interjected, remembering the briars that had twined across his body when we’d first met, courtesy of Yvette’s curse.

“Exactly. And besides, fae are very precious about permanently marking their skin. When you live for as long as we do, it’s a big commitment.” Vanna tilted her head, turning to look at me. “Why did you reach for that flower, Aster?” she asked bluntly.

I flinched at the sudden change of subject.

Since her betrothed had been from the Forest Court, it hadn’t been a surprise when he’d told me Vanna knew that human enchanters existed. But from her question, Thorne had obviously never told her I was one…

I swallowed, not sure how to reply.

She frowned. “The way Thorne reacted…” she muttered, half to herself. “He was so angry, and then the moment he saw you grab the flower... He looked frightened of what you might do… Are you...” She lowered her voice, leaning closer. “Aster, are you an enchantress?”

My eyes widened, my reaction no doubt confirming her guess. I swallowed, my heart suddenly beating faster. “Vanna, you can’t tell anyone.”

She huffed an exhale, sounding hurt. “I won’t. You can trust me. I’m not *Faolan*.” Her head knocked back against the wall. “It explains a lot...”

“Thorne told me none of the other champions can know.”

“They can’t,” Vanna agreed gravely. “There’s a reason the Forest Court kept it a secret. Faolan and I only know of enchanting because of our close ties with the Forest Court. If Kage or Neve found out…”

My shoulders slumped. “Thank you for getting me out of there just now. I thought I was going to lose it with Neve.” A half-smile played

around my lips. “She’d probably have used it as an excuse to turn me into some sort of ice sculpture. The latest decoration for Faolan’s fancy sky palace…”

Vanna let out a dark laugh. “Be grateful, Aster, that she can't hurt you. *Outside* of the Trials at least, she’s forbidden to do so…” Her voice took on a warning tone. “But try not to anger her and Kage too much. Within the Trials, they’re permitted to do whatever they wish. You saw what happened to Nerida. And in the next two Trials, you won’t be on the same team…”

A lump formed in my throat and I turned to meet Vanna’s eyes.

“I never asked for this,” I said. Something inside me cracked open. The desire to confess how afraid I was, how I wished I’d never made those folkdamned bargains with the sky prince. “Faolan—”

“I know,” Vanna interrupted. “Thorne told me.”

I nodded slowly. “It's just...the *savagery*.” My thought returned to Nerida’s limp arm, her delicate body crushed beneath the chest. I began pulling at the loose threads on my skirts, taking some pleasure in watching the perfect Sky Court material unraveling. “Not to mention outside of the Trials…”

The image of the humans gathered around Neve’s feet swam before my eyes again, and I squeezed them shut, a pulse of rage heating my veins.

“In the Cursed Court, the servants were fae—the Little Folk,” I said. “But they were treated well. They served Thorne because they wanted to, in return for his protection from the other creatures of the Folkwood. It was never like—like you saw—”

I opened my eyes to find Vanna looking sympathetically at me, her honey-colored eyes soft. Her wide mouth parted. “It hasn't always been like this,” she said gently. “At the Sky Court, at least.” She cleared her throat. “The Sky Court and the Forest Court are old allies. Faolan’s father would have sided with Thorne’s father, the Alder King, on any matter. It’s why Faolan was sent to the Forest Court as a ward.” Her brow furrowed. “But something changed since Faolan returned from there. I can only assume it was his discovery of enchanters while at the Forest Court.”

“So the Sky Court and the Forest Court are enemies now?”

“Not openly,” Vanna replied. “Faolan’s betrayal of Thorne is the first indicator his alliances have shifted.” She rubbed her lips together. “You see, there’s one issue that has long divided the Court Fae.” She turned to me, a sad expression softening her eyes. “Humans.”

“Humans?”

She nodded. “Some Fae Courts believe humans are lesser than fae and their only purpose should be to serve us. Others, like the current Alder King, believe humans should be able to live free, away from fae

influence.

"When Thorne's father won the last Alder Trials, two hundred and fifty years ago, he took over from the Shadow Court, who believed humans should be enslaved." She cast me a sideways look. "I know two hundred and fifty years sounds like a long time, but for the fae, centuries are about equivalent to human decades. That's not a long enough time to change the deeply ingrained prejudices built by the Shadow Court. Silvius's Treaty, the one which outlines the Tithes, was a compromise. The Courts were allowed to take a certain number of humans to serve them, but those who remained would live free, protected by the Treaty."

"The Tithe humans were the price of stopping a rebellion," I concluded, unease stirring in my chest.

Vanna hugged her knees toward her chest. "The Frost Court and the Shadow Court have historically been anti-human, but fae politics are complicated. Alliances shift constantly. Now it seems the Sky Court has joined their ranks."

I gnawed at my lip. "But the Tithe humans in this Court and the others you mentioned—they're treated terribly. And that's just allowed to happen?"

Vanna winced. "You have to understand, Aster, the way it was before the Treaty… I appreciate how it must feel to see your people treated so badly. But this is a fraction of the cruelty that Neve's and Kage's Courts imposed upon human life before the Treaty limited it to just those humans chosen in Tithes."

I struggled to process this. I liked Vanna… She was one of Thorne's friends, and she'd looked out for me time and time again. But even she seemed convinced this setup was fair.

My shoulders set. "It doesn't seem right," I mumbled. "There are all these fae royals… The Alder King or Queen who rules over all the rest of them… And yet there are no human monarchs trying to make this right, to do what's best for us."

Vanna let out an uncomfortable laugh. "You sound like you've been reading the old stories, Aster."

My chin jerked up, and I looked at her curiously. "What old stories?"

Her smile was sad. "It's all just myth. But in the old stories, there *were* human kings and queens, who ruled their own subjects alongside the Fae Courts."

I stared at her. *Human royalty?* Even in Rosehill, we had no such stories. I couldn't remember ever learning the name of a human king or queen, the name of a human kingdom.

What might that look like? A human ruler who could stand up to the Fae Courts to ensure no cruel human Tithes were taken again?

“Aster,” Vanna said firmly, “whatever you're thinking, worry about it once the Trials are over. Thorne will protect you in the competition, but you need to stay alert. Don't take off those rowan beads, even while you sleep.” Her hand reached for my arm, squeezing it gently. “You know if there's anything I can do… We have the strongest armor in our Court. Perhaps I can rework something of mine to fit you.”

I gave her a small smile, nodding as if in gratitude. But my mind was whirring with everything I’d just learned.

There were five champions still remaining. Neve and Kage hated humans, and Faolan, whom I represented, felt the same…

“What about Morven and the Mountain Court?” I asked Vanna. “Are they pro-human?”

“The Mountain Court has historically supported the Sky Court,” she replied. “But like I say, fae politics are constantly shifting.”

“So that means Thorne is the only champion remaining who would try to protect humans if he became king?” I voiced the thought out loud as it came to me.

Thorne was the only one who would abolish the Tithes, who would fight for humans to live their lives free of the threat of slavery.

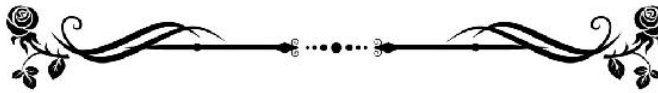
“I suppose so…” Vanna watched me intently.

Then Thorne has to win the Trials.

The realization shook me, a chill running over my skin that had nothing to do with the evening breeze. It wasn’t enough for him just to protect me and get me through to the final Trial to help me pay my debt to Faolan.

He had to win.

Chapter Seventeen



THE DULL LAMPLIGHT danced off the glass walls, turning the plants to spun gold, as though we were huddled inside a great, golden nest. It was overcast outside. Even if I pressed my nose up against the glass window, all I could see was cloud.

But my interest was in what was *inside* the glasshouses, not outside of them.

I hadn't seen Thorne since my conversation with Vanna last night. When I'd woken this morning, guards had barred my door once more. Mosswhistle had appeared from the hidden passage just as I was finishing my breakfast tray, declaring it had something important to show me, so we'd snuck down to the glasshouses.

I turned, leaning my back against the cool, glass wall, my gaze finding Mosswhistle as the brownie began removing books from a burlap sack, stacking them with a dull thump onto the floor beside a narrow, wooden table.

"Mistress asks for books on plants, remember?" the brownie began. "Mosswhistle searches everywhere." Its bony fingers wrapped around one book and then the next while dropping them into a pile. "This book from the kitchens. Drawings of plants, just like Mistress asked for." It nodded eagerly.

I stood and strode over, taking the book from the brownie and flicking through the pages with interest. "That's great, Mosswhistle." But from what I could decipher of the spidery, spiky script, these books catalogued which herbs could be used to flavor food, not their meanings or medicinal uses that would help with my enchantments.

"This from the library," Mosswhistle trilled, its arms quaking as it hefted a huge tome from the pile on the floor onto the table.

I winced as the parchment let up a cloud of dust, a few flakes of the ancient pages drifting down onto the wood.

"This one looks like it's about to fall apart," I said uncertainly. Gingerly, I pinched the cover between my thumb and forefinger, trying to lift it up. The binding crumbled beneath my fingertips, and I hastily let go again.

Mosswhistle tutted. "Mistress good at Craft," it said, shaking its

head, “but not so good at gentle touch.”

I scowled. I was a healer. My gentle touch was my profession. My gaze dropped back to the disintegrating book. Still, perhaps it was better to see what other books the brownie had brought for me instead of starting with this one.

“This from Shadow Court.” The brownie slid another book onto the table.

My eyes lit up as a book of poisons joined the others, then I shuddered back as a nasty thought occurred to me.

It was forbidden for the other champions to hurt me while we were competing...but did that rule extend to the heirs’ servants? If Kage ordered one of the ensorcelled humans to drop poison into my food, would that count?

Discomfited, I replaced the book on top of the others, lining it up neatly. Perhaps this book shouldn’t find its way back to Kage’s chambers.

“Last of all,” Mosswhistle said, its eyes narrowing and a cunning look spreading over its face, “*this*.” It held up a book stuffed with loose papers, bound with string, the pages faintly yellowing.

My face lit up. This looked more promising. Like the journals Sage had kept in Rosehill. Like *I* had kept before I left for the Cursed Court. The binding was simple, brown leather without any title embossed into it.

“This was in Master Faolan’s room.” Mosswhistle’s smile widened. “Under lock and key. But Mosswhistle gets in, oh, yes. Sharp claws.” The brownie lifted one hand from where it clutched the book and waggled its forefinger, demonstrating the long, curved claw extending from its point.

“Very sharp,” I agreed.

“Picks lock,” Mosswhistle added, flourishing its finger in a complicated maneuver. Instead of adding this book onto the pile with the others, the brownie extended a scrawny arm, holding it out to me. “Lots of pictures of plants. Mosswhistle thinks, why would Master Faolan keep a book on plants locked away? Perhaps he wishes Mistress not to find it.”

I beamed at the brownie. “This is perfect, Mosswhistle.”

I felt a rush of warmth as I grasped the book between my hands. This was it; I knew it. I opened it up, and my heart stuttered as I was confronted with exactly what I was looking for. Carefully inked illustrations of different plants, names, information on moon phases and harvesting and planting, where each plant could be found outside of the Court, an outline of their medicinal uses…

Slamming the book closed, I clutched it to my chest, a gleeful smile spreading across my face. “And Faolan had this?”

Mosswhistle nodded. “Sneaking, crafty Faolan,” it said, dusting down the front of its mossy outfit. “But no match for Mosswhistle, Mistress. Sky prince cannot know Mistress puts her best people on the case.”

“My very best people,” I said, nodding my head fervently. I hesitated. If this book had come from Faolan, it almost certainly would give me the information I needed to use the plants in here.

And it made sense, too, that Faolan wouldn't want me to have this information. He wouldn’t want me using my enchanting outside of the Trials.

Which was exactly what I planned to do.

Last night, I’d realized that Thorne had to try to win the Trials for the good of all humans. But it was also my duty to try to help the enslaved humans while I was here.

I let out a long, slow sigh, my fingers unthinkingly stroking the soft leather, feeling for the loose pages of information that had been stuffed inside.

“I need to make a copy,” I said, my brain whirring. “And you’ll have to return it as soon as I’m done. If Faolan notices this is missing, he'll know it's me. Let's see…”

I sank onto a stool beside the table, gesturing vaguely beyond Mosswhistle. “There's a potting bench over there,” I said, waving my arm. “Can you see if there's ink and parchment, and a quill? A feather with a pointed tip,” I clarified.

Sweeping down into an exaggerated bow, Mosswhistle disappeared in a blur.

I began thumbing through the pages. The brownie couldn't have known it for sure, but this was exactly what I needed. Had the humans who’d created this book been ensorcelled? Or had there once been human craftsmen working here as gardeners? My mind drifted back to what Vanna had said. That the Sky Court hadn't always been like this. That it had been different until Faolan had returned from his time at the Forest Court. Perhaps the book had been written before then.

I began flicking through, inserting dead leaves as bookmarks into the pages where there were plants I might use in my enchantment to free the ensorcelled servants.

None of the names were familiar to me. They were all curious sounding, and *fae*—Moonflower, Heartsbane, Lupin’s Tongue, Serpent Flower. But the notes were clear and careful, and as I skimmed through, I was quickly able to identify a few that I thought might be useful. I would do a second read before copying them out to figure out which might work well together and which I would want as backups.

I glanced back at the tall glass walls surrounding us. This would take me all day to work through, and then I would need to spend

some time experimenting with the new plants to get their potencies right. But I still had the rest of the week before the second Trial.

Besides, this was important.

Claws clacking against the tiled floor, Mosswhistle scurried back over, slamming a tray containing the items I'd asked for down onto the table. “Mosswhistle will fetch Mistress some tea?” it suggested.

“Oh, please, Mosswhistle,” I said. One day, I really would have to make the brownie the enchanted daisy chain I'd so often thought about making it. It had earned a whole cape woven from daisy chains. The brownie always helped me unfailingly, even now, when it was no longer a servant of mine.

No, now the brownie was a friend.

I gave Mosswhistle a sidelong smile. Squaring my shoulders, I set about working through the book, tidying the sheets of parchment the brownie had brought me to one side, ready to copy out information on the most relevant plants.

I fell into the kind of calm state I so often felt when I was enchanting or conducting my greenwitch work. For a while, all I was aware of was the scratch of the quill on parchment. The smell of the ink, of the greenery that surrounded me. I could have been back in my workshop in Rosehill or even in the potting shed at the Cursed Court.

I became soil and leaf and bloom and ink. As the time drifted past, I thought only of the task before me, until—

“What a surprise to find you surrounded by plants, petal.” A drawling voice cut across my reverie.

My head snapped up, my eyes glazed. It took a moment to realize it was Thorne, surveying me with a half-smile dancing across his face, eyebrows raised.

“It’s nice to see you too, beast.”

I’d hoped we’d have a chance to speak again before the second Trial. He came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me and resting his chin on my shoulder. I smiled. This casual affection was new to me. We’d had no real time alone together since leaving the Cursed Court.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, eyeing the book on the workbench.

I hesitated for a moment, distracted by his close proximity. It always sent my pulse racing.

Was I about to tell Thorne my plans to try to enchant a cure to ensorcellement? When I’d promised him I wouldn’t use my enchanting, I’d been thinking about the Trials. I wasn’t sure if he would approve of this new plan or not, and I didn’t want to take the risk right now, not when I had a more important conversation in mind.

“Greenwitch work,” I said. It wasn’t exactly a lie—I was only reading about plants. I lifted the book. “Mosswhistle found the book I needed.” I reached for the now-cold tea the brownie had fetched me earlier and took a huge gulp. “It helps me identify the Sky Court plants…”

I looked around the glasshouse, my eyes glittering. Already, I felt more at home here. The spiky plant to my left—that was Lupin’s Tongue, which could be used for the swelling of the throat or to calm the nerves before speaking in public. Higher up in the trees, pale-pink blossoms bloomed in spite of the cold season. That was Song Willow, which could be used for a sleep of the sweetest dreams. I already thought I might try that in my enchantment to free the human servants. It sounded like the opposite of faerie fruit.

Thorne didn’t ask more about what I was doing but gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before releasing his arms and sinking onto the stool beside me.

When I turned toward him, my brow creased in worry. Huge bags darkened beneath his eyes, and his mouth was set in a grim expression. It was a look I didn't recognize on him. Exhaustion and concern battled it out across his features, and I bit down hard on my lip.

“That dinner last night…” he began. “What Neve did. The threats she made. If the rules didn’t prevent me from hurting her…”

Carefully replacing the book on the table, I reached one hand for his, running my fingers lightly over the back of his hand. “I know. I was mad, too.”

“Thank Folk for Vanna taking you outside.” He gave me a tired smile. “I owe her.”

I pushed the teacup from Mosswhistle toward him. “Here. It's cold. But it'll help.”

He looked at it suspiciously, lifting it up and sniffing the liquid inside.

“Oh, stop it.” I slapped him with the back of my hand. “I haven't done anything to it. It's just tea. Mosswhistle made it for me.”

Thorne rolled his eyes. “Well, I am glad to hear you're not thinking of poisoning me,” he muttered, eyes twinkling. “You can’t be too careful with these greenwitches, you know.”

“Drink,” I said, putting my hand under his and lifting the cup to his lips.

He took a sip, then another, then let out a long exhale.

“We need to talk,” I began. “And I need you to hear what I have to say.”

He set the cup down slowly, his brow creasing. “Sounds serious.”

“When I spoke to Vanna last night, she told me about how the Fae

Courts have different views on how humans should be treated."

Thorne nodded, letting me continue.

"I've seen the way Neve and Kage behave," I said. "The way they treat humans in their employ. For one of them to win… That's what it would be like for humans everywhere, not just those taken by the Tithe."

I clenched my fists in my lap. A little flame of fury still burned within me at the memory of Neve urging the Sky Court servants to eat off the floor.

"You have to win this," I breathed out. "And you can't be distracted by protecting me."

Thorne flinched. "Of course I have to protect you. It's because of me you're even caught up in this fae world."

I shook my head. "I made the deals with Faolan. That was *my* error. But that's not the point. This is bigger than just me. If one of the anti-human Courts wins, every human is at risk of being turned into a slave for the fae." My throat tightened. "That can't happen, Thorne. It just can't. And the only way to stop it is by you becoming king. You have a duty to the humans, just like I do as a greenwitch."

Thorne was quiet for a moment. "I want to help protect humans, too. Of course I do. But you are my priority."

"This is bigger than me and my bargains with Faolan. This is about *all* humans."

Thorne ran a hand through his dark hair. "You were brilliant in the first Trial, Aster, so much better than any of the fae. I know what you're capable of...but you saw what was inside that chest."

The oars.

"You can barely swim," he reminded me, as if I didn't already know.

I recalled the day he'd taken me to the glade in the Folkwood and attempted to teach me. Now I wished I'd spent less time admiring his physique and more time as an attentive student.

"Thorne," I said firmly. "Listen to me. I promise you, I will do everything in my power to make it through this next Trial without your help. Oars suggest boats, don't they? There may be no swimming at all. Besides, you said it yourself—Faolan will be trying to arrange these Trials in my favor."

He shook his head before his hazel eyes found mine, piercing me to the spot. "Before the Cursed Court, I didn't care much for my duty as Alder Prince. I didn't care much for anything other than my friends. But seeing how much you care for your sisters and the people of your town..."

My throat clenched.

"You inspire me, Aster, to be a better male. For you. I didn't know

it was possible to care about another so deeply…"

I reached out for his hands, holding them tightly. "So you'll do it? You'll try to win?"

I held my breath when he paused.

"I will," he said, and my heart leaped. "As long as you're not in danger."

His hands were hot in mine, his eyes fierce as he stared at me.

Such little time had passed since I'd fallen in love with Thorne at the Cursed Court, but now I couldn't imagine a world without him in it. Without him at my side. The way I felt when I looked at him… Love seemed too everyday a word.

Neve and Kage had used a word during the first Trial, and Vanna had used it too, out on the balcony after that disastrous dinner…

"Yesterday…" I said hesitantly. "Kage talked about me as your *mate*." I sounded out the word, unfamiliar on my tongue. "What does that mean? Are you my mate?"

His eyes slid sideways to meet mine, and to my surprise, color rose over his throat, into his cheeks.

I suddenly regretted my words, wondering if I'd asked something improper. "You don't have to—"

"No." He shook his head. "It's okay to ask. A fae mate… The closest human equivalent must be a husband or wife. But a mate… It's more than that. Someone you were destined to be with. Two souls split at birth, reunited in our kingdom again. Two halves that have found each other to become whole."

A tiny ember glowed in my chest. That was exactly how I felt when I was with Thorne, like I'd found something I had never known was missing. "And—and they think I'm your—"

Thorne shook his head quickly. "They mean it mockingly," he said, a bitter tone in his voice. "For a fae to find a human mate… I've never heard of it happening. A mating bond is rooted in fae magic."

"Oh," I said in a small voice.

His hands squeezed mine. "Don't worry about it," he said. "It's not something either of us have any control over. It's why I didn't mention it before. It's complicated even in fae relationships—it's not always clear straight away that you've even met your mate. Just imagine…" He breathed out. "Finding yourself attracted to someone, thinking perhaps, as you grow closer, you might like to spend your life with them. But wondering all the while whether this is it—you found the right person. Or whether after fifty or a hundred years together, you might suddenly meet someone else and know instantly that they're your mate. That all this time, the feelings you've poured into that other fae were all for nothing. That's how it is for us."

The cold sweat on my chest turned icy as I realized the implication

of what he was saying.

"If I'm not your mate, does that mean someone else could be?"

"Don't dwell on it, petal," Thorne said gently. "Humans choose their partners, don't they? In some ways, I think that's better. It's not that we're forced to be together. We've chosen each other… I *choose* to be with you, Aster."

As if determined to wipe any concern from my mind, he cupped my cheek, his fingers searingly hot, and kissed me.

I leaned into him, breathing in his familiar scent. Waves of heat and cool washed over me, coursing through my veins in a rush of need to feel him close to me.

I kissed him harder, reaching for the front of his shirt, clutching it between my fingers, tugging him toward me.

"Aster," he groaned, my name soft on his lips.

"I choose you, too," I whispered.

He kissed me again, his fingers tangling in my hair, sending a fluttering sensation through my belly. I trembled, sucking in a breath as his lips moved to my neck, the world around me suddenly spinning.

Then the sound of slow, deliberate clapping jerked me away from him.

Thorne's hands tightened against my skin as a fae cast in golden light richer and brighter than the lamplight sneered at us. "Sorry, am I interrupting?"

Faolan. My heart thudded in my chest.

Leaning closer to Thorne, as if I were looking to him for protection, I swept the journal Mosswhistle had stolen from Faolan's room beneath some loose papers.

"I'm afraid I need a few words with Aster," Faolan purred. "You don't mind, do you, Thorne? After all…" His eyes narrowed in triumph. "It might help keep her safe in the next Trial."

A low growl tore from Thorne's throat. "Aster's safety is not your concern," he snapped.

"Oh, but it is," said Faolan. "Don't forget, Thorne. Aster's *my* champion."

Hard fingers closed down on my arms, and suddenly I was in the air, Faolan's wings blurring behind us.

"I think we'll go somewhere quieter." His voice came from behind me, purposefully loud. "Say...my private chambers?"

Before I could respond, we left the glasshouses behind us in a blur of golden wings.



I stumbled as we landed. I still wasn't used to the sensation of flying,

let alone being carried high above the other floors of the Sky Court. I was furious, too, at how much quicker it was to travel around, how much easier, with wings.

I took a breath, spinning to turn to Faolan. “What do you want now?” I snapped. I was getting *really* tired of being interrupted by the sky prince every time I was alone with Thorne.

Faolan didn’t reply, instead glancing down to readjust his sky-blue waistcoat, which glimmered with pearls and a clever embroidery in white thread.

“You can’t just—just pick me up and fly me off whenever you feel like it.”

I stalked over to the nearest door and flung it open, then leaped back as it opened to reveal a sudden drop out into the huge, empty swell of corridors you could only fly along.

I stomped around the room, reluctantly passing a feather on the wall that I knew marked the entrance to the servants’ corridors. I didn't want Faolan to know that Mosswhistle had shown me those, that I’d cracked that Sky Court system, although he probably realized I’d found a way to escape my chambers. Instead, I marched over to the next door, opening it more tentatively and steeling myself for what I knew would be there.

Another balcony. Another drop.

I twisted to face him, frustration coursing through me.

“I can save you some time—they’re all the same,” Faolan clarified.

“And why do you need to speak with me *in here* specifically?” I crossed my arms.

“I don’t want us to be overheard,” Faolan said simply. “Besides, I've bestowed a great honor upon you, Aster, in naming you the Sky Court’s champion. The first-ever human to compete in the Alder Trials. Isn't that something?”

“No,” I said firmly. “I never asked to be put into your murderous fae games. I didn't want—”

Faolan let out a loud sigh, reaching his arms above his head and stretching out so that his back cracked loudly, his wings fluttering.

“If you want to survive the Alder Trials,” he said with exaggerated patience, “then you will listen to what I have to say.”

I hesitated, hating that what he was saying might be useful. I flung myself backward into a chair, waving a hand for him to continue.

He pressed his lips together, his eyes raking over me. “Convention states you should wait until invited to be seated in front of royalty… But I suppose given the circumstances…” He lowered himself more delicately into a chair opposite me, then reached over to a table beside him. He indicated a glass jug and two silver goblets. “A drink?”

“I’ve told you before,” I muttered, “I don't drink.”

“Of course.” Faolan poured just for himself, the clear liquid steaming slightly, the scent of blossom and honey rising with it. A sigh escaped his lips as he took a long draft. “Now,” he said. “I'm here to remind you—the next Trial is *not* a team activity. It will be every champion for themselves. Including you.”

My heart skipped a beat. “I know how it works, Faolan.”

Faolan’s lips curved into a smile. “Our deal is for you to compete in three Trials. And in order to compete in the third, you need to make it through the second.” He leaned forward, his fingers curling around the steaming, silver goblet. “I expect you to be worrying about *you* making it through, not Thorne.” He took another sip of the drink. “Neve and Kage are mates. They might not harm each other, but they'll be fighting for themselves.”

Something tightened in my stomach. “And what if I fail?” I said softly. The skin pinched around my cheeks, and my heart slowed.

“Come on, Aster,” Faolan said sharply. “Let's not go through this again.”

Very slowly, he placed his goblet back on the table beside him. None of his usual charm brightened his expression as he leaned forward, pressing his hands together, elbows propped on his knees. “Let's see, then…” he seethed. “If you fail to get through the second Trial, you will still owe me one bargain. Am I right in recalling you have two sisters?”

My blood froze in my veins.

“They have nothing to do with our bargains,” I said quickly, going perfectly still. “They're not—”

“And yet,” Faolan said, still in that calm, lethal voice. “They mean something to you. You value them. Just as you competing in the Alder Trials is valuable to me.” He leaned back in his chair, his long fingers gripping the armrests. “Perhaps, if I were feeling generous, I might let you pick which sister I take. You’ve seen how well humans do in the other Courts while you’ve been here, haven’t you, Aster?”

My breath wouldn’t come, all of the air squeezed out of my chest.

“I only asked what happens if I fail. I didn’t say that I wouldn’t try to win.”

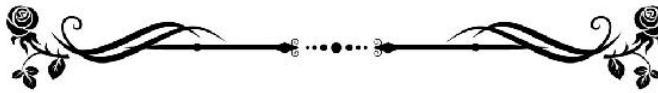
At last, a small, triumphant smile returned to Faolan’s face. “Just remember I have set each of the Trials, Aster. And I had you in mind when I did so.”

My mouth dried. He was as good as admitting he’d rigged the Trials. “So there will be a way for me to win?”

“You’re a smart girl, Aster,” he crooned. “For a human, anyway. You’ll figure it out. I expect to see you competing hard in the next Trial.”

I swallowed. It looked like I had no choice.

Chapter Eighteen



THE fiVE REMAINING champions stood at the edge of a vast, frozen lake, our breaths clouding in the air. I gripped a wooden oar tightly in my hand, trying to quell my nerves as I squinted at the bright, white vista. The morning sky was the palest cornflower blue, weak sunlight still burning through the lingering mist.

A smattering of snow covered the ground, flurries whipping around our ankles. I pulled my fur-trimmed cloak around me, trying to keep the insistent breeze from slithering up my sleeves.

My knees shivered beneath my tight pants. My ears were frozen, the tip of my nose red. Vanna had been apologetic that the armor she'd promised me wasn't ready, but honestly, I was glad to be wrapped in layers of wool and fur instead of steel.

Even if none of the other champions were bundled up like I was. The fae were so warm-blooded, the cold didn't seem to bother them at all.

I pushed down my discomfort, focusing on the challenge at hand, trying to glean what I could from the setting of the Trial. The icy lake was huge, a glassy, flat sheet running all the way up to the horizon.

In front of each of us sat five beautifully carved boats, each with a different color sail—mine the pale-blue of the Sky Court, Morven's a deep russet brown, Thorne's forest green, Neve's snow white, and Kage's black as night.

I chewed my lip, which had turned numb in the cold. The wooden vessels were far larger than the simple rowing boat I'd encountered at the Cursed Court. We could have all fit into one of them if we'd tried. They were crafted with all the beauty and grandeur I'd come to expect of the Sky Court, the carved wood painted a creamy white and decorated with flecks of gold leaf. Each of the colorful sails draped like silk from the masts, stirring only slightly in the crisp, wintry breeze.

I glanced to my right to find Thorne watching me.

He raised his dark eyebrows a fraction and spoke in a low voice, "Are you all right?"

I forced my shoulders to relax and nodded in return, reaching out

to link my fingers through his. “I’m fine. Concentrate on winning.”

I hadn’t told him what Faolan had threatened me with if I failed—taking one of my sisters. Thorne needed to focus on getting through to the next round.

And while I had my own important reasons for needing to perform well in this challenge, it was crucial Thorne left these Trials as the next Alder King. He was the only one among the fae standing here who would protect humans’ rights if he took the throne.

“Any sign of trouble,” he murmured, “and I’ll come straight for you. You don’t have to worry.”

“There won’t be any trouble.” I squeezed his hand. “You just focus on winning this thing.”

I looked to my other side, trying to gauge how the others were feeling about the impending Trial. We didn’t even know what the task was yet, but Neve appeared completely at ease. Her white hair was tossed back over her shoulder, her outfit almost camouflaged with the frost-licked ground around us.

My stomach fluttered like snowflakes. I knew she would be in her element here.

And that as soon as the second Trial commenced, the magic preventing the other champions from harming me would be lifted.

From the far side of the lake, something sparkled, like the sun on metal. I squinted. Faolan flew toward us.

My jaw set as the sky prince reached the shore, his glow brighter than the low-slung morning sunlight. He hovered in front of the five of us, his wings a blur behind him.

“Welcome to the second Trial.” He smiled down and gestured widely with his hands at the lake before us.

“Are you going to tell us what this is all about?” Neve demanded.

“So keen, Frost Princess.” Faolan beamed down at her. “And there I was thinking you might feel at home in this Trial.” He indicated the boats. “It's quite simple. These are your vessels. Sail them however you can. You must get from one side of the frozen lake to the other. The first three champions who pass the finish line on the far side of this lake go through to the next round. The two who do not are out of the running.”

Thorne’s hand slipped from mine, his eyes fixing on the glint of the finish line at the far side of the lake, while Neve’s lips curved into a satisfied smile.

Farther down the line, Morven's face dropped. “How are we supposed to sail these boats across a frozen lake?” he growled, echoing my own worried thoughts.

Faolan just smiled. “I'll see you on the other side.” He pinned me with a long, lingering glance, his blue eyes as cold as our

surroundings. “You may begin.”

He arced up into the air, then hurtled across the lake, glittering like a shooting star.

The four fae wasted no time watching Faolan leave and leaped straight from the shore onto the waiting boats.

I hurried to the edge of my boat, my boots skidding and sliding over the ice. Using the oar for balance, I clambered over the side.

Now what?

I was standing in a boat on top of a frozen lake.

I stared wildly around, looking for some sort of clue of how this was supposed to work. Faolan had as good as told me that he’d designed the Trials with me in mind. So there should be some way for me to win—some trick or loophole that meant there was a way for me to succeed, in spite of this seemingly impossible challenge.

My heart skittered. Would I be forced into revealing my enchantment in order to save my sisters? And yet it didn’t look like there was any way to use my enchantments, even if I wanted to. Any plants that might have grown around the lake had long since died off before the winter, the ground covered in a heavy pelt of snow, the lake encased in a thick layer of ice.

I tried to think like Faolan. Last time, the trick had been the weapons. This time, I had one oar and a limp sail.

There had to be something I was missing.

I looked from side to side to see what the other fae were doing. Neve and Thorne already were out in front, far ahead of the rest of us.

Leaning her hand over the side of the boat and trailing her fingers along the lake, Neve was simply melting the ice around her before refreezing it in a wave behind her, pushing her boat forward.

And Thorne was even farther ahead than Neve.

His silky green sails billowed out, and steam rose from the front of his boat. My breath caught as, for the first time, I appreciated the might of combining magic from the other Courts.

He was using his fire power from the Desert Court to melt the ice, wind magic from the Sky Court to fill his sails, and then Frost Court magic to freeze the water behind him again so none of the other champions could cheat and follow in his wake.

Even as pride swelled in my chest, something in my stomach dropped. I’d sworn to Thorne that I didn’t need his help—that Faolan had told me enough to help me get through this Trial on my own. But could I? And would Thorne come back for me if he realized I was stuck?

Did I *want* him to come back for me, knowing how important it was for humans everywhere that he won?

I looked farther along the shore. Although Neve and Thorne were

making good headway, I wasn't the only one struggling. Kage and Morven also hadn't moved.

With a furious growl, Morven raised the oar above his head before smashing it through the ice with a splintering crack. With his oar in the hole, he used it to lever his boat forward a few inches, physically dragging the vessel with his strength.

I watched, wide-eyed, as his corded muscles bulged beneath his shirt. He switched to the other side, smashing the oar through the ice again. It would take him forever to get across the lake at that pace, physically dragging his boat inch by inch...but he could still come in third if I didn't figure out how to move.

I tried to copy him, bringing my own oar down on the ice. The wood hit with a crack, a shudder reverberating up my arm and rattling my teeth.

It was a longshot anyway. The ice was thick, and I didn't have Morven's magical strength.

This isn't fair.

I looked over at Kage, his cold features snarled in a look of rage and confusion. His shadow walking could get him across the lake, but not his boat, it seemed.

My eyes narrowed as I watched him pace up and down, shadows wreathing him in a dark halo. Clearly his mind magic couldn't help him either.

I shivered as a cold breeze curled around me, my sails fluttering limply. Thorne and Neve were almost halfway across the lake, while the rest of us had barely moved from the near bank.

Okay, think, Aster. There has to be something.

Faolan set these challenges, and he wanted me to get through to the third Trial.

I looked at the mast and the sail, then back at the oar in my hands. I thought uncomfortably back to my first experience in a boat, when I'd almost been drowned by a kelpie. I bit back a hysterical laugh. Even though Thorne had tried to teach me to swim over the summer, I could still barely keep my head above water, so frozen water was preferable in some ways… At least I couldn't drown in ice.

My mind ticked through all the possibilities to get the boat moving, Morven's roars and the smash of ice ringing in my ears.

Tucking my hair behind my ears, I moved to the back of the boat, wedging the oar against the frosty bank and pushing with all my weight to heave the boat farther onto the ice. It slipped forward a little, and elation ran through me, but it was short-lived.

Now that the bank was out of reach, the oar scratched uselessly over the ice.

My heart flipped in my chest. There was no other option. I'd have

to get out of the boat and push it across the lake.

I hesitated a moment, my breath coming quick and light. The ice would be slippery, but my boots had some grip, and Faolan hadn't said we needed to remain in our boats the whole time, had he?

Maybe that was the loophole...

I dropped the oar and threw one leg over the side of the boat.

Then I froze as a resounding crack echoed through the air like thunder. The ice around the boat creaked, cracks spiderwebbing through it. Morven bellowed, thrusting the oar about his head in triumph.

Then the boat lurched. I threw myself back on board as it rocked wildly back and forth, freezing water splashing over the sides. I banged into the mast, the rough wood bruising my arm, before the little boat finally righted itself.

I took a few deep, shuddering breaths, not moving for a moment. The boat suddenly felt unsteady beneath me, the smooth wood lifting and falling in a sensation that made my stomach turn.

Pressing myself to my feet on trembling arms, I looked over the edge. The ice around us had cracked apart into smaller, floating chunks, the dark blue water running like veins between them.

Morven's brute strength had smashed up the ice enough that we could at last use our oars properly, the boats free from their icy moorings. Kage was peering ahead to where the lake was still frozen over in the middle, while Morven was already paddling fiercely, steam rising from his broad back.

Not wanting to waste a moment, I grabbed my oar and began paddling. But the boat just began to spin around until I was facing the shore where we'd started.

I bit back a frustrated yell. In the rowing boat back at the Cursed Court, I'd had two oars, which had been difficult enough but had at least kept me moving in a straight line. On this boat, I was going to have to paddle on one side, then run to the other... Sweat gathered between my shoulder blades as I turned the boat around again, the prow slowly nudging through the broken ice.

How can I ever catch up with Morven?

Dark mist erupted behind me, and I whirled around. Kage had shadowed onto my boat, his black clothes a blot against the white wood.

I shifted the oar protectively in front of myself. "What're you doing?" I demanded.

He took a step forward.

"Kage!" My voice rose a pitch at the malice flickering in his dark-purple eyes. "I'm losing—you'll gain nothing from hurting me." My voice trembled, but I gripped the oar tighter, dropping into the

fighting stance my father had drilled into me. I couldn't hold off the Shadow Court champion with an oar, but I wasn't going to go down without a fight, either.

His expression might as well have been carved from marble. "*You* might be losing, human, but the forest prince is winning."

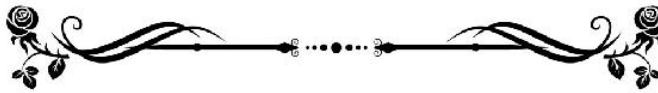
Kage closed the gap between us, snatching the oar from me and snapping it across his knee as if it were a matchstick before tossing it overboard. His gloved hand closed around my upper arm.

"Let me go, Kage," I hissed, a high whine of terror filling my ears. "This won't help you win."

Thorne was almost out of sight across the lake—as were Faolan and all the fae gathered at the finish line. Even Morven was a distance from us now. No one was around to witness what he was about to do.

"It's time to see just how much your mate loves you," Kage snarled, and he hurled me over the side of the boat.

Chapter Nineteen



THE WORLD flIPPED, my screams silenced by icy daggers of water.

Pain shrieked through my body as frozen darkness crashed around me. I kicked, flailing my legs until my head broke through the surface of the water. I sucked in a pained gasp, my heart pounding like it might break through my ribs.

The side of the boat loomed above me, and I tried to cry out for Thorne, but the shock swept my breath away. My thick, fur cloak dragged heavily on my shoulders, already saturated with freezing water. I bobbed beneath the surface again despite my frantic kicking.

I reached for the side of the boat, hands grasping uselessly, dragged down by all my sodden layers.

My face slipped out of the water again, my cheeks so cold they burned.

"Thorne!" I gasped.

The frigid water was already closing in around my neck, filling my ears. I tilted my head back to gulp in a sharp inhale of air before my face slid back beneath the lake.

I began to sink down to the depths, the light swiftly fading.

No!

I struck out harder, but I could already feel my movements slowing, the cold dulling my muscles, my thoughts. I fought against the urge to breathe, but I had only seconds before instinct would kick in and my lungs would fill with piercing water.

The light faded. I became dimly aware that these were my last moments.

My eyelids shuttered, and memories of Rosehill flickered across my vision. Laurel laughing as a child, Ava braiding my hair, Sage's hard-won words of praise, my father's terrible cooking…and then Thorne, wreathed in my roses, staring up at me, telling me he loved me.

Something brushed my leg, and I startled, slowly twisting to stare down into the inky abyss.

What was that—

Hands grasped my arms, and my whole body lurched upward, shadows curling around me.

A moment later, I crashed out of the frozen water before thudding down onto a hard surface.

Air.

I sucked in lungfuls of sweet, freezing air. My vision flickered, my body concerned only with breathing. I sagged in my rescuer's arms, panting.

"You're okay." Low, soothing words wrapped around me.

Thorne.

I tried to speak but couldn't stop my teeth chattering as I gazed up into his eyes.

Despite his reassuring words, Thorne's face pinched with concern as he stared down at me. "It's okay, Aster. I've got you. You're safe now."

Still shivering uncontrollably, I attempted to prop myself onto my elbows. Dark-green sails soared up above, bright, cold sunlight glinting off the water surrounding us. I was on Thorne's boat, way over on the other side of the lake.

I twisted. Neve's frost-white sails had just glided into first place to a smattering of applause from the fae spectators on shore.

Thorne peeled the sodden furs from my back before rubbing his hands rapidly up and down my arms, singeing the material with the heat. "I should shadow you out of here."

"No! I-I'm fine," I stuttered, my whole body shaking violently. "You need t-to w-win. You promised."

"Stay close to me, use my warmth." Thorne wrapped one arm around me, pulling me close to his side. Beneath my wet clothes, my skin felt numb. I couldn't even feel his scorching body heat.

My eyes flicked closed.

Thorne had told me the other fae would use me to get to him…but part of me had doubted they'd be so cruel.

I wouldn't doubt it again. Kage had been prepared to drown me just to slow Thorne down...

I supposed I shouldn't be surprised—what was one human life when the heirs were fighting for two hundred and fifty years as the next Alder King or Queen?

The metallic tang of magic coated my tongue as the wind picked up around us again, snapping the green sails taut. I opened my eyes to a flare of brightness as Thorne's fire magic melted the ice in front of his boat, cutting a swift line for the finish.

I shivered again. We were close. He was going to make it.

Then a rush of darkness had us both spinning around.

Kage stood at the far side of the boat, his fists clenched, his amethyst eyes seething.

"I knew you couldn't resist coming back to save the worthless life

of your mortal plaything," he goaded, then disappeared.

Kage reappeared behind me, wrapped his arms around my waist, then shadowed us again. The next thing I knew, I was at the opposite end of the boat, staring at Thorne as Kage lifted me from the ground, as if he were about to throw me overboard again.

I wriggled in his vise-like grip, still numb from my time in the water, wishing I had my iron knife while knowing I was in no state to use it.

Thorne lunged toward us with a roar, and Kage flung me aside as if I were a rag doll before launching himself at the forest prince. I stumbled and fell, catching myself on the side of the boat with an arm.

I turned back, trying hopelessly to keep up with what was happening in the fight as the two fae princes shadowed around the boat, slipping out of one another's grip, avoiding blows from connecting.

Kage appeared suddenly at my side, and then Thorne was beside him, face contorted in fury.

"Don't you *dare* touch her again."

"She's making you weak." The shadow prince barked a laugh. "No Alder Prince should be beholden to something so easy to break."

They both shadowed away at the same time, Kage reappearing on the other side of the boat, Thorne just in front of me.

"Aster is strong in ways you can't even imagine."

I gripped the edge of the boat tightly, trying to stand. Then something bumped against the hull.

Tearing my eyes away from the fight, I peered over the side. The lake was no longer glasslike but had wrinkled into ripples all around us.

My heart sank. The last time I'd seen ripples like that on a lake, a kelpie had launched itself into my rowing boat. Coldness swept over me again. When I'd been underwater, just before Thorne had grabbed me, I was sure something had brushed my leg…

I turned back in time to see Thorne collide with Kage and throw him over the far side of the boat. But there was no splash. The Shadow Court fae reappeared back on the boat in a mist of darkness, completely dry.

With their mirrored shadow powers, this was an impossible fight.

"Tired?" Kage taunted Thorne, who had shadowed back to plant himself firmly between me and the other fae male, his fingers twitching, his body humming with magic. Thorne had vast reserves and types of magic at his disposal, but if Kage could just disappear and reappear at will, Thorne might never land a hit.

I tightened my grip on the side of the boat with numb fingers, shivering violently with the sodden clothes pressing against my skin.

Then my gaze fixed behind Kage.

A scaled, gray-green tentacle snaked out of the water, silent and probing, the sign of a much larger creature beneath the flimsy wood of the boat...

"Uh…*Thorne*…" My voice rose in warning, "There's something in the lake."

The scent of my fear must have reached the two males, because they both took their eyes off one another, following my gaze to where the tentacles rose higher and higher around us.

More and more of them wriggled up, casting lines of shadow across the boat, reminding me of fingers about to close into a fist.

With a shudder, I stumbled away from the edge, making for the mast in the very center of the boat. Kage's eyes flicked to me, and he lunged.

Thorne moved like lightning. In an instant, he was right beside Kage. Seizing the shadow prince by one of his curved horns, he smashed his fist into him hard enough to send him flying.

Kage crashed into the side of the boat, the back of his skull cracking against the wood so hard it splintered. He toppled sideways, eyes rolling back into his head as he hit the floor.

The silence that followed rang in my ears, and I released the wince that had my shoulders tight up around my ears. Warily, I eyed the tentacles still coiling around the boat, like tongues tasting the air. They seemed to be holding off… Perhaps whatever this creature was, it could sense Thorne's magic.

I dropped my gaze to the fallen prince, my heart skittering. "Is he...dead?"

Thorne dropped down to Kage's side, pressing two fingers to Kage's wrist. He shook his head. "Unconscious."

"What do we do with him now?"

Tempting though it was, if we tossed him overboard, he would drown. Although Kage hadn't hesitated to throw me into the water, I wasn't sure I had it in me to watch Thorne condemn him to death.

Then the tentacles caved in.

"Watch out!" I cried, just as Thorne rammed himself against me, pinning me against the mast. My heart thumped in my chest as the tentacles writhed across the boat, groping like a hand in the dark. I couldn't tear my eyes from them. They left slick, inky patterns of water across the wood, like shadows through a canopy of leaves.

Then one found the soft, limp heap of Kage's body.

The rest of the tentacles shivered, then snapped across the boat, coiling around the shadow prince. They wrapped around him, claiming him as a prize, until every inch of his skin was hidden beneath the greasy, sucking tentacles.

I flinched as they yanked Kage over the side of the boat.

But Thorne held me tight, his gaze on the water, which began to froth below us.

"We need to move, *now*, while it's distracted." His whispered instruction was firm.

"But Kage…" Even as I said it, I knew it was too late.

I glanced toward the center of the boat, where the sails hung limp against the mast.

Thorne followed my gaze, and a breeze stirred above our heads, the sails slowly billowing out as they filled with a brisk wind. "I can also make a current..." Stepping away from me, he held his hands over the water, and the boat began to pick up speed, as if it were rushing down a stream or river.

I loosed a breath as we moved farther away from whatever creature lurked beneath the lake's surface, staring back at where the water churned behind us. The tentacles and the body of the shadow prince had already disappeared. I suddenly began shaking again, the adrenaline that had blanketed me wearing off.

Shock resounded through me in its place, a wave of ice slithering through my veins.

It's gone. Kage can't hurt you. I struggled to reassure myself, the cold piercing my thoughts, my body.

The boat skimmed across the lake, the finish line growing larger in front of us, the sounds of the gathered fae in the audience louder, but the shivers in my body just continued to get worse.

"Do you think…it killed him?" I tentatively voiced, my teeth chattering.

I didn't know why I was feeling guilty about leaving Kage. He'd tried to kill me—and Thorne.

And yet it didn't stop the sinking feeling building in the pit of my stomach.

Thorne wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his warmth once more.

"You're freezing," he muttered, his voice tight.

My fingers and toes were painfully numb, and I still couldn't stop shivering. My thoughts were growing sluggish, my body moving just as slowly, like my blood was frozen in my veins.

As a greenwitch, I knew the symptoms of hypothermia all too well. We needed to reach the finish line so Thorne could win, and then get me back to the warmth of the palace. Fast.

His lips pressed against my hair, and I heard him murmur, "I thought I'd lost you."

I trembled against Thorne's side, his body heat still not getting through my skin, the breeze bitingly cold as it raked through my wet

hair and sodden clothes. The sounds of polite applause rang in my ears as the boat glided across the finish line, a rippling sky-blue ribbon that they must have raised again by magic after Neve broke through it coming first.

My chest rose a little.

Thorne had made it in second place. He was going through to the final.

Then I swallowed. My boat was still far away, on the opposite shore, where we had started. I'd thought I couldn't possibly feel any colder, but when I remembered Faolan's threats toward my sisters... Thorne had won, but I had lost.

Thorne's boat shuddered as it knocked against the bank of the lake, and he shadowed us off and onto dry land in the blink of an eye.

I gripped him tighter as I scanned the crowd of Sky Court fae gathered above the ground, some hovering, their wings a blur, others seated on chair-like wisps of cloud. I looked for Faolan…and found Neve.

The frost princess prowled toward us, her face frozen in fury, her pale skin that always looked frostbitten tinged bluer than usual.

She stopped a few paces from Thorne, her face like marble. "I saw what you did." She spoke slowly, her words low with menace. "You killed him. My *mate*."

"He t-tried to k-kill me first," I cut in before Thorne could reply, my teeth chattering from the cold. "He shadowed onto my boat and pushed me overboard. He followed us back to Thorne's boat. It was self-defense."

She turned to face me slowly, her sharp jaw tightening, her eyes flashing like quicksilver. "You think your worthless, fleeting human life is equal to the Crown Prince of the Shadow Court?" Her tone was controlled, her icy rage leashed. It made her even more terrifying. "He is worth a hundred of you. A *thousand*, in every way that matters." Her gaze snapped back to Thorne, her pale-blue eyes narrowing with hatred. "You killed him, and mark my words, Forest Prince, I will have my revenge."

Thorne's grip tightened around me, but outwardly he looked unperturbed by Neve's threats. He gave a lazy incline of his head. "If you saw what I did, as you claim, then you'll know Kage was alive when he went into the water. I didn't kill him."

"You may as well have." She took a step forward, her nails lengthening with shards of ice, like claws.

The shadows around Thorne's body darkened. "Kage should have known that anyone who tried to harm Aster would end up dead, one way or another. While we're on the topic, you'd do well to remember the same."

Just when I was sure Neve was about to unleash her fury, Faolan's voice rang out on the wind. I looked up to where he hovered overhead.

I'd expected him to be furious with me. But he looked calm, his perfect features cool and composed.

Perhaps he'd seen what had happened with Kage—that he'd tried to sabotage me. He couldn't miss the fact I was soaked to the bone, my limbs rattling uncontrollably.

"Thorne of the Forest Court takes second place," he announced, "after Neve of the Frost Court."

Polite applause.

I turned back to the lake, wondering how long it would take Morven to smash through the ice and claim third place.

"And in third place… Aster of the Sky Court."

What?

"What?" Neve hissed, echoing my own thoughts in a shrill voice colder and sharper than the icy wind clawing through the air. "That's *impossible*. Her boat didn't make it."

Neve couldn't even bring myself to use my name.

"I never said anything about having to use the boats," Faolan replied in his light, singsong voice. He looked at me with a faintly amused smile curving his lips.

The sky prince turned back to Neve. "I said you had to get from one side of the frozen lake to the other and that the first three champions who passed the finish line would go through to the next round. Of course, if you assumed the rules were similar to those of the first Trial, I can see why you might have gotten confused..."

Neve's blue-tinted lips opened and closed in disbelief, rage rendering her mute.

After the first Trial, where simply flying or shadowing up the rock face had resulted in Ren getting trapped, no wonder none of the champions had wanted to risk doing something so straightforward this time.

Faolan's gestures and wording had made it sound like the boats were part of the task. Silver bells, he'd given us all oars...

No wonder he looked pleased with himself.

"So Thorne and K-Kage could have just shadowed across and won?" I asked, still not quite believing what he was saying.

"Don't you dare say his name," Neve bit out.

"Aster crossed the finish line third, a hairsbreadth behind Thorne. So she goes through." Faolan's voice was patient but firm. "The three of you will compete in the final Trial."

My mind clouded, the hushed murmurs of the gathered Sky Court and the argument breaking out between Neve and Faolan fading from

my hearing.

I was through to the final round of the Alder Trials.

With that thought, the shivers returned to my body more violently than before.

My eyes fluttered closed.

"Faolan," Thorne barked. "I need to get her back to the palace. You need to lift the rules—let me take her to her chambers."

He sounded distant, like we were back beneath the water of the lake. I could hear the vague chiming of bickering fae voices. I couldn't think why anyone would be arguing. Couldn't remember.

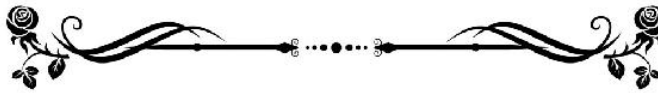
"They're not *my rules*," Faolan snapped back, something like panic tingeing his voice.

"Faolan," Thorne begged. "*Please*…"

I was so tired.

If I just closed my eyes for a second…

Chapter Twenty



I DIMLY BECAME aware of steam rising in front of me. I moved an arm —and recoiled at the splash of water.

Panic rose—then fell as I realized this water was hot, scented. Soothing. It curled silkily around my skin, easing the cold from my bones. Bubbles lined the surface like lace. This was not the cold, icy water of the lake.

I was in a bath.

I sat up, cool air wrapping around my shoulders as I emerged from the water, hot droplets still clinging to my skin. I was back in the Sky Court palace, in a bathing chamber that looked vaguely familiar. White, fluffy towels hung from a gilded rail, a finely painted cabinet stood in one corner, and tall marble pillars lined the room. A huge mirror edged with gold reflected my mass of dark hair and pale face staring back at me through the steam-filled room.

I flinched at the sound of claws clattering over tiles, then relaxed at a familiar, anxious voice muttering to itself.

Mosswhistle.

I sank lower again, allowing the hot, fragrant water to cover my shoulders.

The brownie leaned over the bath to squirt in more of the scented liquid that created the bubbles, despite the fact that the froth was almost up to my chin.

I tilted my head back. The bath was so huge that it was more like a pool than an actual tub. Behind me, a large, arched window framed the sky, a brilliant cobalt blue this afternoon, and enchanted, just like the rest of the Sky Court, to retain the heat despite its airy appearance.

“Mistress awake!” Mosswhistle swilled a finger in the water, then pressed a clawed hand to my forehead. “Water hot enough?”

I smiled at the tenderness of the brownie’s care. As a greenwitch, I was used to being the one standing vigil at a bedside, checking temperatures…

“Yes, thank you,” I murmured in reply, despite the fist of ice that still clutched in my chest.

I put a hand to my heart. I should have warmed up by now. Perhaps I was still in shock from the events of the day—going underwater, the tentacles clasping the boat, Kage's death…and the discovery that I'd be going through to the final Trial with Thorne.

My lips curved up. Just being in the final Trial meant I'd complete my bargains with Faolan. Next time, I could truly concentrate on helping Thorne win.

Although, as well as figuring out the Trial itself, we'd also have to consider the third champion—the frost princess who wanted us both dead and who had sworn vengeance against us...

A knock sounded at the door.

"It's me. Can I come in?"

Thorne.

His voice sent a rush of warmth through my body, the cold in my chest finally thawing. I cast my gaze down to where my body was completely covered by Mosswhistle's bubbles, then over to the door.

I startled as I realized Bethel and Mariyad were standing on either side of it, eyes staring vacantly across the room, as unmoving as statues. Had Faolan sent them here?

I bit my lip. I hated to see them like this. My ensorcellment cure was still non-existent—I hadn't had time to return to the glasshouses to make use of the careful notes I'd penned on the book Mosswhistle had stolen for me—but I resolved to return as soon as possible now that the second Trial was over.

The girls would be the first servants I cured if I succeeded in making an antidote.

"Aster?" Thorne's voice came again, tight with worry this time, the door creaking under the weight of hands pressed against it.

"Come in," I called back, and the door cracked open, the tall fae prince slipping into the bathroom.

My breath caught as his gaze raked over me, heat flooding my cheeks in spite of the frothy layer of bubbles concealing my body, before he glanced over to Bethel and Mariyad, then Mosswhistle.

"Do you always draw this much of a crowd when you bathe?"

I gave him a wry smile. "Only when I almost die."

Thorne's smile instantly vanished, and Mosswhistle let out a small whimper, sniffling into a towel.

"I'm fine now, though," I said quickly. If Thorne thought I wasn't okay, he might lose focus on winning the Trials in order to protect me. "Honestly."

Mosswhistle dabbed its shining bulbous eyes then resumed sorting through bottles of lotions and soaps.

I turned back to Thorne, who had perched on the edge of the bath. The pool was large enough that he could easily have slid in with me…

I was glad for the steam swirling around my face, a flush already on my cheeks from the heat of the water. I leaned closer, the water rippling around me as I moved to sit with my chin resting on my hands, looking up at him through my lashes.

The steam curled around his shirt, the damp material sticking to the hard planes of his chest.

I shifted closer, but he jerked back, arms folded.

"You should never have told me to win," he said, a firm expression on his face. "I left you behind, and you almost died."

I held his gaze. "But I didn't, did I?"

"Because I came back for you." Thorne stared down at me, anger and concern warring on his features.

"I'm fine." I tried to sound reassuring, then quickly changed the subject. "Where are we? This doesn't look like my bathing chamber."

His face set. "It's not. Apparently even in a life-and-death situation, it's not possible to bend the Trial rules even a little. Not according to that irondamned sky prince." Thorne hesitated, then shook his head. "He suggested we use this space—these are his private chambers—and sent your servants after you in case we needed anything."

My gaze flicked back to the two girls still standing motionless in the doorway. Tingles skittered over my skin. It made me uneasy to be in Faolan's chambers, like he was watching somehow.

"I thought he said he'd rigged the Trials," I said in a low voice. "I thought there would be a way for me to win on my own…"

Thorne blew out a breath. "Perhaps Faolan always assumed I'd help you through this one. In case any of the other champions were starting to suspect he'd weighted things in your favor."

I swished a hand through the bubbles. That hadn't *sounded* like what Faolan had meant… I'd been so sure I could make it through the second Trial without needing someone else's help. He'd specifically told me not to work with Thorne.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right?" Thorne asked again when I didn't reply, worry still staining his voice. "Seeing you like that… When I thought we'd made it…"

"I'm okay. I just needed to warm up." I pushed back a curl of wet hair that fell insistently onto my forehead from where the rest of it was piled damply above my head. "Humans can't keep themselves warm like the fae can. But this bath was perfect. The cold won't cause me any lasting damage." I took a breath. "And like I told you before. What's more important than anything else is that you win this thing. For all the Tithe humans… For me."

Thorne leaned forward, his long fingers reaching out to stroke the curl back as it fell forward into my face again. "In spite of all my magic, I've never felt as powerless as when I realized Kage was

hurting you."

Thorne had never looked at me so intensely. I gripped his hand with my wet one, interlocking my fingers with his, sparks humming over my skin at the contact. It was still odd to see his hands bare, without the thorn tattoos that had once wound their way over his body, marking the curse.

Reaching up, I traced one finger over an imaginary briar, and a thrill ran through me as the fae prince shivered beneath my touch.

"Mosswhistle," I called out, my voice catching, "will you take the girls and build a fire in my chambers for when I come out?"

The brownie's head poked over the top of the bath. "Of course, Mistress!" it hooted. "Mosswhistle will create a blaze with the fire of a thousand dragons!"

Before I could clarify that I would prefer Mosswhistle's blaze to be contained to the hearth, it had already left the room, dragging the two servants away and squeaking instructions.

I turned back to Thorne, tingles still running up my arms from where his hand held mine. "So you still can't come into my chambers?" I dared to ask, the shiver reaching the back of my neck.

His hazel eyes trained on mine, a hard, predatory stare making his face go very still. "Afraid not, petal." He tilted his head. "Would you like me to?"

My heartbeat grew lighter, faster.

With his free hand, Thorne trailed his fingers down my face, along my jaw, then lower. His soft fingertips grazed down the side of my neck before lingering at my collarbones. I couldn't quite seem to catch my breath.

"It's just that if these bathing chambers are Faolan's… It'd be nice to be someplace with a little more privacy," I said in a breathy rush. I returned to running my fingers softly over his arm. "And I ought to thank you for what you did for me today…"

Thorne let out a soft growl that left heat pooling in my core. "Careful, Aster. You're already beholden to one fae in this palace for promising more than you meant to…"

The heat inside me cooled.

Letting out a soft sigh, I slid my arm back beneath the water. "Can't I just be grateful to a fae prince without accidentally signing my life away?" I shot him a rueful smile. "You did save my life."

"You saved my life when you broke the curse," he countered instantly, the steamy look not quite faded from his eyes. "And Kage only targeted you because of me."

"Kage hated humans. He didn't need an excuse to try to hurt me." Even though he *had* done it to distract Thorne, I wanted to alleviate the guilt darkening Thorne's gaze.

“I should have stayed with you,” he insisted, agitated.

“You were trying to win. For all humans. Like you promised.”

“None of the other competitors are having to recover in a bath, Aster.”

“But at least I will recover. Other champions haven’t.” My words were gentle and reassuring, but they made Thorne flinch. Elsewhere in the Sky Court, Neve would be grieving for her mate, and I still hadn’t seen Sereia, the sea princess, since Nerida had been killed in the first Trial. “And other humans are dying every day because of the Tithes,” I added meaningfully.

Thorne sighed. “I don’t know what it is about you, Aster, but you have this way with words… This way of making me feel like I could be...*better*.”

My heart squeezed.

“I told you that when I first came here, I wasn’t even sure I was going to enter the Trials. I’ve never been interested in ruling like my father. I didn’t want the responsibility, didn’t see what the benefit would be for me.” His eyes slid to me. “Now… Because of *you*, Aster… Because of the compassion you show for your people… I want to win. I think I would be a good king, for humans as well as the fae.”

I didn’t think I’d ever loved him more.

“Still, the next Trial…” he began.

“In the next Trial, it’s even more important that you focus on winning the crown,” I said sternly. “So we’ll do it together. We’re stronger together. If I’m at your side, no one can hurt me. And we’ll protect each other, whatever Faolan throws at us. You’re going to win this thing.”

The apprehension in Thorne’s expression eased, then he nodded. “These Trials… However Faolan may be leaning them in your favor, he has to set them in a way that they test the strengths needed for an Alder King or Queen. The first Trial, despite what we originally thought, was a test of wisdom. *You’re* the one who figured out how to use the resources we were given to achieve our goal. And although it appeared to be a race on the surface, this last Trial was a test of magic.”

“So what will the third Trial test?”

Thorne shrugged, “It could be anything. Physical strength, ruthlessness, focus, bravery…”

I supposed it didn’t matter what the third Trial was, seeing as all I needed to do was turn up and the final bargain would be fulfilled.

“Your powers…” I gazed up into Thorne’s eyes through the steam and paused, nearly swept away by his beauty, the tenderness with which he gazed down at me. “At the Cursed Court, I saw you use weather magic from the Sky Court as well as Forest Court magic, but

you have so much more than that…"

He nodded. "The sky magic is tied closely with my emotions, and my forest magic came naturally in the Folkwood."

"In the last Trial, you were using so many at once, no one could keep up."

Thorne smiled. "I don't have *every* power from every Court. What you saw there was some of my elemental magic—fire from the Desert Court and ice from the Frost Court. From the Sea and River Courts, I have power over saltwater and freshwater. Plus, of course, you've seen that I can shadow walk."

My head spun. Thorne listed these skills so casually.

I counted on my fingers. *Seven Courts.* "What's left?"

"Strength from the Mountain Court."

I shifted in the tub. "You're as strong as Morven?"

He nodded.

"But he's so much bigger."

Thorne's lips curled in amusement, and he puffed out his chest a little. "It's magical strength, petal. The size of your muscles doesn't matter."

"*Right*…" I agreed with a smile. "Then you also have magic from the Metal Court?"

"Yes, but not like Vanna's. You saw how she can turn things to metal. I can't conjure it like she can, but I can melt existing metal into its liquid state and refashion it into whatever shape I want."

"Like a human forge."

"A *fae* forge," he corrected with a grin. "And then lastly the Flower Court… Like Ren, those fae are winged and have magic that can make them small, the size of a pixie. I can't do that. But I share some of their other magic. Their Court has strong powers of attraction to make them alluring to fae and humans." His lips lifted higher. "Not that I've ever had to use them with a face like this."

Rolling my eyes, I gave him a shove, even as my heart beat faster. He had such a range and breadth of magic, it seemed like there was nothing he couldn't do.

And that was on top of the near-immortal lifespan, the heightened fae senses, and the otherworldly beauty that all came as standard just by being one of the Court Fae...

I wiggled my toes beneath the water, my wrinkled feet reminding me how human I was in comparison.

But it also reassured me that whatever the final challenge, we'd be able to beat Neve to the crown.

"And you really have no idea how you can use magic from the different Courts?" I asked at last.

He sighed. "I used to wonder about it too, petal. But as I said

before, if my parents knew why, they never told me. Probably rightly so, given how...arrogant I was, in my youth." He raked a hand through his hair. "Then I was banished to the Cursed Court. And...well, it's always seemed normal to me. My magic is no different than your hand or your leg are to you. It's just part of me."

I stared down at the water, noticing the bubbles had thinned. "Will you pass me a towel?" I indicated the small mountain of fluffy towels Mosswhistle had prepared on the other side of the bathroom.

Thorne shadowed over, grabbed one, and reappeared at my side, holding open the towel wide for me to step into.

"Did anyone ever tell you you're very lazy?" I chided, holding his gaze as I stood slowly, the water trickling down my bare skin. "It would have taken seconds to walk there."

Thorne's eyes never left mine. "Needless seconds away from your side, petal."

I gave him an exasperated smile. Even though his tone made it sound like he was joking, as a fae there was always that kernel of truth in his words that made me blush.

I stepped out of the bath and into his arms as he wrapped the soft, white towel around me. Leaning down, he kissed me gently on the lips.

"So the next Trial," I murmured, knotting my fingers through his hair as I pulled away slightly, "it's even more important that you win. And we'll make sure that you do. It's you and me against Neve. A team."

"A team," he agreed, his eyes half-lidded as I arched toward him again, my body flush against his.

"Speaking of teams," Thorne shifted back, suddenly looking nervous, "I have a question to ask you. There's a Winter Solstice Ball in three days, before the final task. Champions have to attend. I'd like it…if you attended with me. As my partner."

I met his questioning stare, worry flickering behind those brilliant eyes. This would make a statement. Not just to the other champions, but to Faolan. That we were a team, and that we would fight together in the final challenge.

"Before I answer, I have a question for *you*," I replied, shifting in his arms to wrap the towel around my body and tucking it in at the top so it held up by itself. "Will this be like the fae revel at the Cursed Court?"

"Knowing Faolan, there will be far less debauchery and far more niceties." He didn't tear his eyes from me. "At least on the surface. But the guest list is still all fae…"

"Any beasts?" I asked lightly.

"Not this time." Thorne scooped me up in his arms, and I gave a

giddy laugh as he carried me across the bathing chamber to where a pile of fresh clothes had been left waiting for me.

Putting me gently back down, he quirked an eyebrow. “Is this less lazy for you?”

I leaned into him. “Oh, you can feel free to carry me around like that any time…”

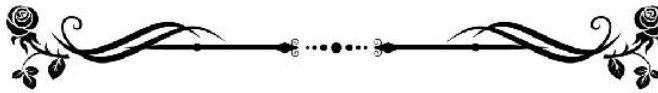
He grinned, reaching for the towel and tugging me toward him. “So…” he drawled. “You never answered my invitation. Do you make it a habit to turn down fae princes who lay their hearts at your feet? First refusing my dinner at the Cursed Court, now leaving me waiting to hear whether I’ll have to face the Winter Solstice Ball alone...”

Despite his words, he still stared keenly into my eyes. My heart tapped out a quick rhythm. The sunlight dancing off the bathing pool highlighted the gold in his eyes, the harsh light bringing out the sharpness of his cheekbones, his jaw…

The predatory look in his gaze that would once have made me want to run now made my knees tremble for a very different reason.

I gazed up at him, my lips curving into a smile. “I’d be honored to be your partner.”

Chapter Twenty-One



THE OPEN-CEILINGED CORRIDOR was already darkening with the twilight, the sprites flickering to life in their lanterns as I hurried through the Sky Court. Time had run away with me in the glasshouses, and now I was late getting ready for the Winter Solstice Ball.

Mosswhistle scampered ahead of me, talons ringing on stone in time with my own quick footsteps. The brownie had been incredibly helpful today, fetching the unfamiliar plants that I needed while I experimented with them to learn more about their properties.

My dress swished around my legs. I hadn't been able to find anything suitable for garden work, so I'd worn one of the extravagant Sky Court outfits Faolan had provided, secretly pleased that the gauzy cream material was covered in smears of sticky sap, yellow pollen, and dark soil. There had been no guards outside my room to stop me —Faolan was expecting me at the ball tonight.

When I pushed into my chambers, I was greeted with steam billowing from the bathroom and Bethel and Mariyad moving around the room with more purpose than usual.

"Good evening," I greeted them, slightly breathless as I bent down to unlace my boots.

They didn't reply—they never did—but it felt rude to treat them like they weren't there just because they were ensorcelled. I was itching to cure them.

Over the past three days, I'd made some progress with the antidote —at least, I had a recipe I thought would work. But I would wait until I was free from Faolan's final bargain to administer it. Hopefully by then, Thorne would be the new Alder King, so after freeing the servants, I'd be able to get them all out of here safely, too.

Not that I'd told Thorne about that just yet. I was worried he would consider it breaking my promise to not use my enchanting while I was here.

Still, guilt stirred in my stomach. We'd agreed to work as a team... Perhaps I would tell him what I was planning at the ball tonight.

I kicked my boots off, and Mosswhistle raced forward to sweep

them away as I moved toward the bed.

I halted, frowning down at an ornate blue gown that had been spread over the white coverlet.

"What's this?" I asked the girls.

"A dress, Mistress," Mosswhistle supplied in a helpful voice, clutching my boots to its chest. I looked down, and it tapped its nose knowingly.

Despite my exasperation, I gave the brownie a fond smile.

"Bethel, Mariyad," I called the girls over. They drifted toward me, their gazes sleepy. "This dress… Where did it come from?"

For a moment, I thought neither would speak.

Then Bethel whispered, "Faolan." Her voice was husky with disuse.

"For the Winter Solstice Ball," Mariyad added in a distant tone. "For his champion."

I looked back down at the gown, something twisting in the pit of my stomach.

It was as undeniably fae as it was beautiful. The pale, almost translucent material sat in light layers of dove gray and duck egg blue. I pursed my lips as I leaned forward to touch it, rubbing the silky material between my finger and thumb.

Faolan's colors.

I stalked through to bathing chambers, mulling it over as I quickly washed the dirt and greenery from my face and body.

The blue-gray gown would mark me as Faolan's champion. No doubt he'd be dressed in something similar.

I winced. I'd been dressed in his colors and in Sky Court fashions ever since I'd awoken here. Forced to declare my allegiances to his Court through what I wore. But our bargains didn't cover how I dressed.

Padding back through to the bedroom, I stood wrapped in a cream, silk robe. I'd gotten as far as putting on my undergarments and my rowan beads before stopping. I stared at the dress lying on the bed and gnawed at my thumbnail.

I knew I was late, that the other guests and champions were probably already arriving at the ball, but I just couldn't bring myself to put on the dress Faolan had picked for me.

I was going to the ball as Thorne's partner, not Faolan's champion.

A loud knock at the door startled me from my whirling thoughts.

"Who is it?" I called out.

"It's me." Vanna's smooth voice came from the other side. "Thorne sent me to see what's keeping you."

Mosswhistle trotted over to open the door. Vanna couldn't step into my room thanks to the magic of the Trials, but she peered in, frowning when she saw my state of undress.

“You look lovely,” I remarked, taking in the silver gown that wrapped around her curves like liquid metal, the metallic lace that snaked up her arms. She gleamed in the low, dusky light, looking every inch the fae princess of the Metal Court.

And I looked like a human who had just rolled out of a bath—pink cheeked and wrinkly fingered.

“What’s wrong?” Her gaze scanned the room, and I lifted up the dress to show her. It felt as light as air in my hands, like I was holding a cloud. The frills lifted and fluttered in the breeze curling through the door.

“It doesn’t fit?”

I tossed it back on the bed. “I haven’t even tried it on. I just…” My shoulders sank. “Faolan picked it for me. It’s Sky Court colors, Sky Court fashion…”

“So you want to wear something more...human?” Vanna tossed her braids behind her back, leaning against the doorframe.

I shook my head.

“Mistress does not belong with Faolan,” Mosswhistle said gravely, crossing its arms.

Understanding lit Vanna’s features, her silver-painted lips curving up. “You want something more *Thorne*.”

Something warm kindled in my stomach at the look on Vanna’s face. I remembered the tattoo on her back, the forest motif dedicated to her mate. Vanna knew what it was to show your allegiance in an outward way.

She slung me a conspiratorial smile, beckoning me to the door. “Come with me.”

Vanna didn’t elaborate further, but I trusted her, even if I probably shouldn’t after what had happened the last time I’d trusted one of Thorne’s fae friends.

I followed Vanna through the Sky Court, my bare feet padding over the shining white marble floors, across narrow bridges and around pearly staircases—she obviously knew which routes didn’t involve flying.

Uncomfortably, I pulled my robe closer around me. Everyone we passed was dripping in finery and heading in the opposite direction—to the Winter Solstice Ball. Just as I was about to question where Vanna was taking me, we stopped in front of two large, cream-colored doors.

They slid open soundlessly beneath Vanna’s palms.

I stepped inside, tilting my head back. The high-ceilinged room was as vast and airy as any I’d seen in the Court, with huge archways open to the night. My jaw dropped.

Lines of clothes hung from every single wall. Floor to ceiling, in

every color of the rainbow.

I took a step farther in, my heart lifting.

As well as the fabrics rippling in a faint breeze, shoes sat in neat pairs on low marble shelves, and jewelry glinted in the flickering faelight.

Ava would have fainted at the sight.

Even I felt giddy.

"Vanna?" Aurora's voice trilled.

The sky princess was standing on a small plinth in the center of the room while several humans attended to her. My eyes widened. These humans weren't dressed in the drab gray of the other servants, but wore white, silk tunics, with measuring tapes thrown over their shoulders and pins clamped between their teeth.

They were craftsmen—seamstresses.

My gaze snapped back to Aurora as she leaned forward and adjusted her gown, sending ripples of pink and green lights dancing around the room. I caught my breath. Loose layers of sheer, shimmering material that seemed to be giving off the soft, undulating light hung over inky blue skirts studded with tiny diamonds. Like the colors were sweeping across the night sky.

Aurora straightened, lifting one hand to wave. There was barely anything to the bodice, almost entirely covered with glittering diamonds and cut down to her navel at the front.

Winged Little Folk darted around her face, clutching powder puffs and hairbrushes, pinning sections of her silky, peach-gold hair away from her face.

She fanned them away as she flew daintily to the ground, her white, lacy wings fluttering out behind her.

"Returned so soon?" She addressed Vanna. "Did you change your mind about the dress? Or have you come to chide me for being late to my brother's ball?"

"Actually..." Vanna put a hand to the base of my back, ushering me forward. "I was hoping you could help someone running even later than you."

The Sky Court princess fluttered closer to me, her sweet, silk-and-honey scent filling the air as she gave me a light kiss on my cheek, her lips like petals.

"Welcome, human Aster."

"You look very beautiful, Aurora," I said as she pulled back.

"Yes, I know," she replied with a deadpan expression.

I stifled a laugh. Only the fae could get away with such utter arrogance.

"Modest as always, Rory." Vanna chuckled. "Your undeniable radiance aside, we need something for Aster to wear to the Winter

Solstice Ball…"

Aurora's keen, fae eyes appraised me as I clutched my robe more tightly around my chest, feeling awkward in the presence of two such beautiful fae females, especially dressed in their finery. I felt like a maid in the presence of queens.

Aurora cocked her head to one side. "My brother didn't provide anything?"

"He did, but I… It wasn't..." I floundered and shot Vanna a look.

Vanna put a hand on Aurora's arm and led her away a few steps to speak in low tones.

My gaze slipped back to the clothes lining the walls.

I'd never seen anything like it. Not Ava's wardrobe, not the clothes I'd owned at the Cursed Court, not in my chambers here... I couldn't help feeling a little envious. I'd never had much reason to wear such extravagant fashions beyond the odd town dance in Rosehill. Being a greenwitch was a dirty job, so I'd always stuck to simple gowns and practical pinafores. Even after being taken in the Tithe, I'd never really been given any choice about what I wore.

"Oh!" Aurora gave a silvery laugh, her wings fluttering with excitement. "I have fashions from every Court here. Let's see now…"

She took a swift step toward me, pinching her fingers at my waist and skimming her hands across the tops of my shoulders. She lifted my chin higher with a knuckle, fixing me with a long look. "Yes… I think they will fit." She turned to the human seamstresses. "Would you please help Aster up there and get her ready?"

Then she flew up to a row of dresses high above the ground, her muttered thoughts inaudible as metal hangers scraped and tinkled beneath her hands.

The seamstresses helped me up onto the podium where Aurora had stood moments before. The Little Folk who'd been painting Aurora's face fluttered around me, their curious, chiming voices ringing in my ears and tiny fingers digging into my skin. I glanced at Vanna, but she'd wandered over to a cabinet and begun trying on jewelry, admiring herself in a hand mirror.

"Robe, please." The human who spoke looked at me with shrewd eyes. From the way the others stood slightly back from her, she seemed to be in charge. She had a lovely human face, with color in her cheeks, her brown-and-gray hair scraped back into a low bun. Her expression was carefully blank, but her voice didn't have the same distant tone the other servants did...

It didn't escape my notice that Aurora had spoken to the seamstresses politely, either.

I slipped out of my robe and gave the Little Folk still hovering in the air a stern look, a chill sweeping over my skin as I was left

standing in my undergarments. After a few moments of waiting awkwardly with my arms wrapped around myself, Aurora landed before me, several dresses bundled in her arms, all in varying shades of greens and earth tones.

"Aurora," I muttered in a low voice. "These humans… They're not ensorcelled."

The sky princess didn't meet my gaze but began shaking out the dresses and laying them out. "No," she said shortly. "They're not."

I hesitated, then added, "It's just I can't help noticing that you and Faolan have quite contrasting views toward humans." I swallowed, wondering whether I was pushing her too far. "You told me before that things used to be different in the Sky Court. And before the first Trial, Faolan said he'd warned you about what happened when a fae got too close to a human…"

Aurora's movements slowed, then she shot me a look so fierce that my stomach clenched, my legs suddenly feeling watery. "My brother is a master of manipulating his words." She flung the final dress down. "But *you* told *me* that Thorne loved you and that you truly loved him back. Were you lying?"

The air between us seemed to crackle, and my mouth turned dry. I hadn't meant to pry. I'd just wanted to understand why Faolan's sister, of all people, seemed so happy to help me.

I shook my head rapidly. "No. I wasn't lying," I said, my voice catching.

Aurora blinked, her expression turning sad. "Then my affections were not misplaced, as I was led to believe…"

Aurora was involved with a human?

Vanna wandered back over, her neck now adorned with a glittering choker of blue lapis and silver. She looked curiously between the two of us, then threw herself down on a pink chaise lounge. "I'm borrowing this!" she called over to Aurora, who waved her words away with a flutter of her dainty fingers.

The tension in the air dissipated.

A smile twitched my lips. Despite the familiarity between them, the two females were so different. Vanna was completely down-to-earth while Aurora was the total opposite, flighty and ethereal… I supposed their personalities suited their Courts.

"Arms up," the seamstress instructed, and I scrunched up my face as material was tugged over my head, messing my hair.

The second the dress was on, the Little Folk descended on me in a buzz of wings, scraping the dirt from beneath my nails, combing sharp fingers through my hair, and spritzing clouds of perfume, all at Aurora's instruction.

Meanwhile, the seamstresses attended to the gown—the Craft

elements—lacing it up and pinning it in places so it hugged my body like a glove.

I stood perfectly still, leaving them to it. After several minutes of poking and prodding and fastening, Aurora spun me around to face the huge gilt mirror on the wall behind me.

I gasped, one hand flying up to touch my lips.

The gown was a soft, pale green, the color of…*sage*.

My breath caught above my heart, my chin quivering.

I skimmed my hands over the material. The corseted bodice hugged my body tightly, nipping in at my waist before flowing out into a ballgown skirt that rippled away from me in layers of soft tulle. The skirts were stitched with thousands of tiny white flowers, their petals fluttering around shining beads in their centers. The voluminous sleeves were made of the same sheer tulle but sat off of the shoulder, so my décolletage was bare.

I finally dared to look at my face. My dark hair had been pinned back, a fan of delicate leaves rising from the back of my head, as intricate as any jewelry.

Aurora flew back a few steps to appraise me, placing a finger on her lips, her own gown floating around her in shimmers of rose and emerald light as she hovered just above the floor. She shook her head. "It's still missing something…"

"I know just the thing." Vanna walked over and inspected the skirts, then dropped into a crouch. With a touch of her forefinger, gleaming metal spread over my skirts as she turned the appliqué flowers golden.

Aurora dipped down to join her, brushing her fingers over Vanna's gold. Every one of the tiny, gilt flowers began to twinkle, like sunlight on a forest floor.

The two fae females stepped back to admire their handiwork. Aurora let out a light, musical laugh and wrapped an arm around Vanna's waist.

I glanced back into the mirror, my vision blurring a little as emotion built in my throat.

I didn't know whether it was because Vanna and Aurora were being nice to me after so many other fae in the Trials had manipulated me, belittled me, or outright tried to kill me. Or whether it was the fact that spending time with them reminded me of my sisters, of Ava forcing Laurel and me to play dress up when we were younger.

I sniffed. Perhaps it was simply this dress, with its fresh greens and delicate petals. It felt like the forest, like the enchantment that tingled in my fingertips, like *Thorne*—and that felt like home.

Exchanging satisfied smiles, Vanna and Aurora ushered me out of the room and back into the corridor. I let them lead me, their arms

linked with mine on either side. I almost matched them for height thanks to the high-heeled shoes hidden beneath my dress.

Aurora gave a breathy laugh as we came to a sudden standstill, and I realized why.

Ahead of us, framed by an arch that looked out onto the navy skies beyond, was Thorne, hands clasped behind his back.

I bunched my hands in my skirts as he turned to face us.

Silver bells. Vanna must have known exactly how Thorne was dressed before taking me to Aurora because we looked…

Well, we looked perfect together.

Back at the Cursed Court, the Little Folk had made fun of me when I'd dressed similarly to Thorne. But this wasn't just a happy accident.

Vanna gave my arm a quick squeeze as she and Aurora let go. I turned to look after them, realizing I hadn't thanked them properly, but the females were already gone, leaving Thorne and me alone in the corridor.

His throat bobbed as he stepped closer. "You look…"

I found myself just as lost for words. As usual, the fae prince was breathtaking. My gaze roamed over his silken hair, his long eyelashes, the sharp, perfect line of his cheekbones, prominent in the low light.

All of that beauty was wrapped in a smart dress suit of deepest forest green, tailored to show off his lithe, powerful body. The material was stitched with flecks of gold—or maybe they were also Vanna's handiwork—and instead of his usual black, he wore supple, brown, knee-high boots.

Every inch a forest prince.

"I look…?" I prompted, raising an eyebrow.

He closed the gap between us, placing both hands at my waist and holding me tight, his thumbs grazing circles against my hips. His hazel eyes darkened as I met his gaze.

"You look…like you belong with me," he said gruffly. "For this night and every night that follows."

The heat in his voice sent goosebumps rising on the backs of my arms as I placed my hands over his.

I let out a slow breath. "And you belong with me."

Somehow, in this empty, echoing corridor of the Sky Court, it felt like we were making a vow. The words stretched taut between us, a thread of a promise, binding us together.

I swallowed, my mouth dry. Thorne led me to the arched window, where the sounds of the Winter Solstice Ball floated up to us, music and voices filling the night sky.

He held out a hand, eyes gleaming. "You and I, petal, are about to make an entrance."

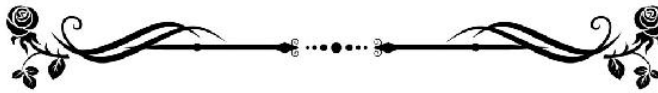
I imagined the faces of all the Sky Court fae. They'd been rude to

me when I'd been dressed as one of them before, as Faolan's pet.

What would they make of me now? Of *us*?

"Then let's do it." I slid my hand into Thorne's, breathing in his scent as shadows wreathed the both of us.

Chapter Twenty-Two



WE STEPPED out of Thorne's shadows, emerging into the ballroom—and I stopped immediately. My breath caught in my throat, my eyes widening. I'd been expecting a revel like the one at the Cursed Court. This… This was the kind of fae ball my sister Ava and her friends had dreamed of.

Striking fae couples twirled each other around a dancefloor glittering like ice, under an open sky that revealed the beauty of the night. Snow drifted down beneath stars that shone like diamonds, surrounded by a swaying, soft, green-and-pink light that somehow reminded me of Aurora's dress.

Above us, members of the Sky Court danced midair, fluttering up and down in the air as well as in elegant loops that mirrored the dancers moving around the floor.

A lump formed in my throat, and my fingers clutched Thorne's hand, gripping it tightly. I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry.

However struck I was by the beauty of this room...I was just as struck by the thought that this was no place for a human.

I twisted my head, gnawing on my lip as I regarded Thorne. He, of course, fit in perfectly, with his angular, delicate features, his long, elegant limbs.

Well, almost perfectly.

Everyone else at the ball had dressed in deference to the winter, in Sky Court blues, ice whites, and silver grays that matched the statues of ice and the delicate patterns of frost sweeping up the walls. Thorne and I had come dressed for spring.

My heart rattled in my chest. My rejection of Faolan's dress suddenly seemed like more of a statement than I'd realized.

Thorne's gaze dropped to meet mine. "You really do look beautiful," he murmured, grazing his thumb over my knuckles.

I shivered at his touch, strength flowing into me. "So do you," I whispered back.

He grinned. "Of course I do. I'm quite the catch, you know."

I rolled my eyes. "And what about me?" I lifted my chin higher, suddenly feeling bolder. "The first ever human champion?"

Thorne's grin widened. "You complement my beauty perfectly."

I swatted him with the back of my hand. "Perhaps I'll find some other dashing fae prince to sweep me off my feet," I muttered, pretending to scout the dancefloor. "I'm sure there are plenty here who'd take that honor more seriously…"

"No one more than I," a clipped, elegant voice said from beside me.

I turned to see Faolan's brow pinched in disapproval as his gaze swept up and down the gown Aurora had sourced for me. "I suppose *you* gave this to her?" He returned his attention to Thorne.

I held my breath, praying I wouldn't get Aurora into trouble. She might be a princess of this Court, but her brother was the one who ruled.

Thorne gave an exaggerated shrug. "Whatever would make you think that?" He cast a pointed look down at his own outfit, which matched my own.

Faolan's lips thinned. "I left a dress for you," he told me curtly before glowering at Thorne. "I suppose you didn't even read what was written on your invitation about dress code."

Amusement flickered in Thorne's eyes. "Oh, I read it."

Faolan cleared his throat, pink tingeing his cheeks, before he returned his attention to me, his back to Thorne. "I've come to dance with my champion. It's tradition for the Alder Trials host to—"

"I don't think so," Thorne cut in smoothly. Grasping my hand, he led me out onto the dancefloor.

I followed, casting a look back over my shoulder at Faolan's solitary figure, his shoulders set. Just for a moment, my heart twisted. "Were you and Faolan ever truly friends?"

Thorne blew out a breath. "I thought so. Faolan was never quite... Something always kept him separate from the rest of us. It was why he didn't come out with us that night with Eila…" He trailed off, a distant look coming over his eyes.

I squeezed his hand gently, and he glanced down at me.

"If I'm honest, I was surprised when he continued to visit me at the Cursed Court...but pleased. I thought perhaps I'd misjudged him over those years. That however different he was from the rest of us, he was at least loyal." His expression darkened. "Now I wonder how much of it was him trying to ensure the curse wasn't broken so that I wouldn't be able to compete in these Trials."

I bit my lip. It seemed to me like all of Faolan's visits to the Cursed Court would have been for that very reason. It stung a little to think that all of Faolan's flirting, the times he'd helped me, had all been to encourage me to fall for him, not Thorne. To stop me breaking the curse.

Not for the first time, I wondered how much interaction he'd had with the other girls. My stomach clenched as I wondered what he might have told them—whether he might even have been responsible for them fleeing into the Folkwood. After all, it had been on his goading that I'd visited the Arbor Wing, causing the fight that had sent me running into the woods.

Thorne's hand fastened around my waist, drawing me back out of my speculations.

"In any case," he said, a glint in his eye. "If he was trying to come between us...he failed."

I placed my hand in his. "Nothing will ever come between us," I said firmly. I dropped my gaze to the points of my shoes, just visible beneath my sweeping, golden skirts. "Although I'm worried what you'll think when you realize I don't know any of these steps," I added with a wry smile.

Thorne grinned. "Don't worry, petal. Just follow my lead."

"Your lead?" I snorted. "May I remind you the last time we were on a dancefloor together, *beast*, following your lead entailed launching us through a glass window?"

He attempted to look contrite. "Trust me. You're dancing with a prince, not a beast tonight…and you'll find a ball hosted by Faolan is much more civilized than a revel."

I opened my mouth to protest, but before I could, Thorne swept me around the ballroom.

He spun me in gentle circles, nothing complicated, just an elegant, repetitive movement I was able to keep up with. Our circles grew wider, faster, in time with music.

I jerked my head at the realization there must be other human craftsmen here if there was music. I couldn't make them out between the mass of fae bodies. Together, they were like snow glittering in a blizzard. I caught only the occasional glance of silver-painted skin, huge, moth-like wings, the points of ears beneath crowns like icicles.

Then Thorne tugged me closer, and I stopped worrying about anybody else at all.

"I find you more beautiful than any of them." His breath tickled the shell of my ear, sending shivers running over my skin. "And you're more powerful. My match in every way." His hand slid up my back, playing with the ends of my curls.

"I should hope so," I replied in a light tone, even as my heart thudded heavily in my chest. "The first Prince of Faerie with powers from every Court. The future Alder King. It's enough to make any girl want to prove herself."

Thorne didn't laugh but pulled me closer still, my head spinning as he twirled me around. "They're all looking at you, Aster," he

breathed. “You don’t even need to use your enchantments for them to see what you’re worth. It’s written into the way you hold yourself, the color of your eyes. The way you don’t flinch away from me like the other fae do.”

A smile tugged up the corners of my lips. “Believe me, I have no interest in moving away from you right now.” I inched closer until I could feel his heart beating against mine.

Then a heavy body to my right crashed into us, knocking me out of Thorne’s arms.

I gasped as I was flung away from him, the two of us joined only by his hand firmly holding on to mine.

A flood of cool liquid poured down my front, a deep red color staining the beautiful gown.

I jerked my head up, but whoever had spilled the wine had already disappeared into the crowd. I turned back to Thorne. His eyes darted around the room, a lethal look shining in them.

Whoever had knocked into me, I didn’t blame them for not sticking around. Shadows curled from Thorne’s fists, his shoulders, and his teeth were bared.

“You think that was deliberate?” I asked slowly, gauging his reaction.

His jaw set as he gave me a brief nod.

I loosed a breath, pressing a hand to his chest. “It doesn’t matter,” I said. “All it means is that we got our message across.”

“Aster!” Vanna appeared at my side, looking ready to launch into a fight.

A moment later, Aurora appeared beside us, her lips pressed together as she took in her stained dress.

I bit my lip. “Aurora—I-I’m sorry.”

Thorne’s gaze snapped to her. “This was from you?” He quirked up an eyebrow.

“Better that Faolan doesn’t know,” she said in a clipped voice. Then her eyes met mine. “You’re upset,” she said in a tone of surprise. “Why? It’s not your dress.” Her brow creased. “The seamstresses can make you another if it means so much to you.”

“Come on,” Vanna said in a growl. She met Thorne’s gaze. “You stay here,” she said firmly, “and find whoever dared to do this.” Turning back to me, she grabbed my elbow, a smile fixed on her face. “Let’s find you a shawl to cover that up. Or I’m sure we can borrow another dress of Aurora’s.” She squeezed my elbow. “I promise, you needn’t wear the dress Faolan left you.”

I nodded and leaned into her, grateful.

She steered me back through the crowd of fae, Aurora close behind us. My muscles tensed. Where previously I'd seen only a beautiful,

glittering crowd, now I noticed the way lips curled as they looked at me, the titters that swelled as we passed.

"All this…" I said in a low voice. "Is it just because I'm human?"

Vanna's throat bobbed, her expression grim.

But Aurora was not so reticent. "Well, of course it is," she said. "Humans don't *attend* the Winter Solstice Ball. Even before this..." She waved her hand, an uncomfortable look passing over her face as we took in the gray expressions of the servants holding up platters of drinks, strange delicacies. "But particularly during the Alder Trials."

My brow creased. "Why during the Trials?"

"Aurora—" Vanna started.

"Well, it's a celebration of fae dominance, isn't it?" she said, still sounding baffled. She tutted. "Faolan and Thorne really never explained any of this to you?" Her brow wrinkled. "Do you prefer acting in ignorance?"

I pursed my lips, certain Aurora met no harm by the question but equally sure I would snap at her if I tried to answer.

"Let's just worry about this dress for now," Vanna said brusquely. "I think it's best if we just find something to hide the stain…"

"Not entering the human games, *champion*?" a snide voice sounded from my left.

I halted. A slender fae with pearl-white skin and a mass of hair like smoke grinned at me with silver-painted lips. Unmistakably from the Shadow Court.

"What games?" I asked sharply.

"It doesn't matter," Vanna said quickly. "Ignore Roya. We just need to fix this dress."

I stilled, catching something in her tone, and turned back to the shadow fae. "What games?" I repeated.

Roya's lip lifted. "You think you're too good for the other humans here now, do you?"

I relaxed slightly. "Go on, then." I rolled my eyes, waving a hand. "Tell me how I ought to be serving you drinks, like the other humans here. How this dress doesn't make me one of you. I've heard it all before."

The fae's silver eyes ran down my body, her expression making my toes curl. "While I don't deny such a role might be more fitting for you...I wasn't suggesting you serve drinks. Haven't you seen the other humans here?"

My gaze darted to Vanna. There it was—that pained expression that had set me on edge.

"What other humans?" I ground out.

"Out the back," Roya said in a singsong voice. "How neglectful of the forest prince not to tell his mate what entertainment would be on

offer for her this evening. I suppose it's no wonder he'd forbid you from participating, even if that is your rightful place."

"Out back?" I demanded.

The shadow fae extended a slender arm toward two huge archways that opened onto a balcony. Then, with a giggle, she disappeared into shadow.

I crossed my arms. "What's happening outside?"

"It's—" Aurora started.

"Thorne didn't want you to see," Vanna said in a firm voice, her expression set.

"Vanna," I snapped, "you can tell me now, or I can go see for myself."

She glared at me. "Or you can come with us, fetch a shawl, and not rise to the taunting of that shadow—"

I strode off before she could finish, heart pounding in my chest. I ignored the hushed whispers, the swirl of laughter that followed me, my attention fixed on the archways. Despite the lack of plants, my fingers itched to cast an enchantment, to do something to defend myself, even if I didn't know what exactly I would find outside.

I ducked under the arch, and the cold hit me hard, the bitter, icy kiss of winter. Huge bowls of golden fire flickered along a lengthy balcony, but they cast no warmth, just a strange, dancing light that made it difficult to see. I hugged my arms around myself, my breath clouding in the air as I wondered how long I could tolerate such extreme cold in this flimsy fae gown.

Blinking rapidly, I looked over to where a group of figures had gathered at the far side of the balcony.

"So Faolan's champion found us." A sneering voice drifted over.

Neve strode toward me, wearing a sleeveless gown made entirely of snowflakes. Blue stained her lips, not her usual frostbitten hue, but a darker indigo I recognized—folkshade leaf powder, a poison deadly to the fae, although when used in very small quantities it was said to give them a high. I'd seen it at the revel at the Cursed Court, too.

She stopped just before me. "Tell us, mortal. Are you here to observe or to participate?"

My brow creased. I hesitated, torn between the desire to find out what exactly was going on here and reluctant to confess to Neve that I didn't know.

Her lips lifted higher. "Undecided? Why not come and see…" She turned, striding back along the balcony to the group of figures.

Hating myself for doing so, I followed.

Glittering eyes turned to face me as I approached them. All of their lips were stained with that telltale blue powder. I guessed most of the fae here were from the Frost Court or the Shadow Court, but with

everyone dressed in the same wintry colors, I couldn't be sure.

As I drew closer, the crowd parted like a wave, revealing the entertainment that had been laid out for them.

Bile burned the back of my throat.

Two humans lunged for each other in the middle of a circle of fae. They ripped at each other's torn skin, wrenching out handfuls of hair, bestial snarls and grunts tearing from their throats.

Their expressions remained vacant, glassy.

Dozens more humans lined the edge of the balcony, many of them bloodied and bruised, all of them blue with cold.

"We still have a couple more rounds to go." Neve's silky voice came from right behind my shoulder. "So there's still time for you to participate, if you'd like to."

I twisted to face her, the blood draining from my face.

She smirked. "In the meantime…"

Another human servant appeared beside her, arms trembling beneath a heavy marble tray laden with gold and silver coins.

My stomach heaved as I realized what the fae were doing.

"If you want a tip," Neve murmured, "the dark-haired one fights more fiercely." She gestured to the two humans tearing each other to pieces. "But the blonde was heavier when we weighed them. So take your pick…"

A roar sounded in my ears.

Betting. They were *betting* on these humans.

I lifted my chin, fury shining in my eyes. "Does Faolan know this is happening?"

She laughed as though I'd asked a stupid question.

A hand closed around my arm, and I jerked back, then softened when I realized it was Vanna.

"Come on, Aster," she said in a firm yet gentle tone, her hand reaching for me again. "You've seen enough."

I stared at her, incredulous. "We have to stop this." My voice came out high-pitched, like the bleat of an animal.

The fae around us laughed again, but I ignored them. "We can find Thorne—find Faolan—"

"Let's *go*," she said again, a vein pulsing in her forehead. She pulled me roughly away, marching me back toward the glow of the ballroom.

"You know where we are, mortal." Neve's taunts followed me. "Should you change your mind." She raised her voice even louder. "I'll even strike you a bargain. If you win a fight, I'll match the bets placed against you, let you keep them as winnings. It should be more than enough to buy you a new gown…"

I twisted out of Vanna's grip with a snarl, fingers reaching for

plants that weren't there.

Vanna grabbed my shoulders and dragged me back again. "*Come on*," she hissed.

"Where's Thorne?" My heart still rattled in my chest, and an acrid taste coated my tongue. "We have to find him. To—to stop them—"

"Aster." Vanna sounded exasperated now. "What those fae were doing… It's just something that happens during the Trials."

I drew to an abrupt halt. "*Just something that happens*?" I repeated in disbelief.

She sighed and began dragging me on again. "Like Aurora said, these Trials are supposed to represent fae dominance. Of course, it's not as simple as that now, since the Tithes were introduced...but everyone gets a little carried away at the Alder Trials."

"Carried away?" I seethed. "You think getting humans to rip each other apart is just getting *carried away*?"

She relented, her grip loosening on me. "It's not that… Look, most of the Courts aren't involved. No one from *my* Court is. No one from Thorne's. But it's difficult, Aster. These are traditions that have existed for centuries upon centuries. You can't just announce it can't be done anymore. People wouldn't listen."

I turned away from her, not wanting to hear her say another word, fury lacing each breath I forced myself to draw in.

I inhaled very slowly, allowing Vanna to lead me back into the sea of glittering fae, their eyes still fixed on me. My gaze scanned the room.

In this celebration of midwinter, there were no plants decorating the ballroom. Nothing I could use to stop what was happening.

But in the glasshouses, plants still bloomed. Plants I could use to free the humans from their ensorcellment…

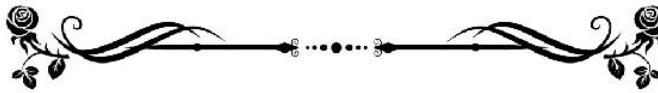
My fingernails dug into my palms as I clenched my hands into fists.

I'd decided to wait until after the final Trial before putting my plan into action, but as long as the other humans here were ensorcelled, they were too easy for the fae to prey upon, powerless to defend themselves or even know what they were doing.

I couldn't allow it to go on a moment longer.

"I think I'll find myself a new dress." Turning my back on Vanna, I stalked out of the ballroom alone.

Chapter Twenty-Three



MY MIND STILLED, my thoughts narrowing to my heated fingertips, focusing only on the plants in front of me. The smell of their sap lingered in the humid air of the glasshouse.

Beyond the skirts of my gown, parchment and tools were spread around me in the dirt. I'd set up a makeshift work area on the ground, lit only by a few stick candles, the fire beneath my pot, and my twinkling dress.

Sweat beaded between my shoulder blades, the air sultry despite the midwinter temperatures outside. Like the rest of the Sky Court, the glasshouses were magically heated, and I was way too warm.

I wiped the back of my hand across my sticky brow. This was at least the place in this vast Court where I felt calmest, the shadowy plants and canopy of trees overhead making me feel like I was working in a forest clearing.

Memories from earlier in the night flared through me, reminding me of what was beyond the glasshouses—the fae ball I'd left behind, the humans ensorcelled to fight one another. I let the memories come, channeling my anger into my work, feeling a sense of release to be enchanting again.

Whether it was because I hadn't enchanted properly since I'd arrived at the Sky Court or the raw emotion churning through me, my magic seemed to bubble instantly to the surface, eager to spread into the plants I was carefully preparing.

I breathed in the woody scent of herbs, falling into the state of flow I needed, balancing the wild roar of my emotions with the intense focus on my work. My finger grazed along the parchment next to me. I'd made a list of all of the ingredients I wanted to try for an antidote to ensorcellment using plants I knew, then scoured my notes from the book Mosswhistle had stolen from Faolan to find fae equivalents growing in this glasshouse.

I already had the faerie fruit, and it had been easy to find equivalent plants for the healing comfrey, protective vervain, and fragrant, purifying mint I would have used at home.

Other substitutes had taken more thought...but I'd finally decided

on Song Willow as a replacement for mugwort—both used to help open the mind—and Moonflower, which I'd harvested under a new moon for full potency. I'd discarded the luminous white flowers, instead focusing on the pale, fork-shaped roots my notes told me had similar energizing properties to ginseng.

As I worked through the night, steeping the plants to extract their energies, my fingertips heated until they tingled, infusing the plants' natural properties with my enchantments.

A small cauldron bubbled in front of me, golden flames licking its base, ready for the last ingredient. The one I'd only realized I needed tonight at the ball.

Folkshade.

I shivered as I remembered the audience of fae watching the humans fight, their eyes glazed with bloodlust, their lips tinged blue with the potent powder.

I gritted my teeth. I would do something about this, even if the Court Fae wouldn't. Even if my fae *friends* thought it was okay to turn a blind eye.

I sat back, rolling my shoulders to loosen the tension building there. I was glad to have spent the best part of the night away from the fae.

Well, almost all of them.

Mosswhistle brushed through the plants, batting away ferns. "I have the last ingredient!" Its whispering voice rose through the glasshouse.

The brownie wouldn't tell me how it had known I was here and not at the ball, but it had turned up half an hour after I'd arrived, Bethel and Mariyad in tow.

The girls stood behind me, still as statues, but even their eerie, ensorcelled presence was better than the fae of the ball. And at least if I kept them here with me, I knew they weren't being forced into fights for entertainment.

My jaw firmed. "Just set it here, Mosswhistle, and remember—*don't* touch it."

Mosswhistle emptied the small basket into a pile where I indicated.

"Why no touching?" it asked, staring down at the plants and then up at me with wide eyes. It unwrapped the makeshift burlap gloves I'd made for its hands.

"It's folkshade," I explained.

Seeing the fae at the ball with the blue powder staining their lips had given me the idea. In large quantities or a more powerful decoction—like I was about to make—it was fatal to the fae, but it was harmless to humans.

And while the other plants I'd collected would counter the effects

of the ensorcellment…enchanting *this* ingredient would be key to unbinding the fae magic that had cast the ensorcellment.

I brushed my finger over the innocuous green leaves and the small, purple flowers. Like many poisonous plants, it *looked* perfectly normal. I sniffed it. No scent.

Sweeping up the flowers, stems, and leaves, I dropped them into the simmering water. It would take a while to decoct...but then I would have everything I needed.

"Bethel, Mariyad, come and sit down." I spoke to the girls gently but firmly. They moved around to the opposite side of the cauldron and sank down to the ground, their eyes glassy through the steam rising up between us.

Mosswhistle curled up next to me, polishing faerie fruit against its mossy tunic like an apple and taking a huge bite. When it caught me watching it, the brownie offered the dripping fruit, baring its sharp teeth. "Mistress hungry?"

I shook my head, declining. I'd rather starve than eat faerie fruit again. Instead, I sipped on my cold herbal tea, trying to quell my grumbling stomach.

After I'd spent an hour staring into the cauldron and answering Mosswhistle's admiring questions about my Craft, the folkshade decoction was ready, the water stained a deep blue. I lifted the cauldron from the fire and set it down, then tilted my head back. The first hint of dawn lightened the skies through the lattice of plants and the vaulted glass ceiling, casting the branches and the metal structure of the glasshouse a pale, shadowy gray.

My eyes burned and my body ached, both from staying up all night and from using my enchanting magic, but my mind was alert and fizzing as dawn approached.

With steady fingers, I added the folkshade to the rest of the antidote, swirling it around in the cauldron and watching as the color clouded to a gray-purple. My mouth dried. It smelled sweet and bitter at the same time.

I was fairly confident it would work, but there was only one way to try it. I decanted a little into a vial, then looked across at Bethel and Mariyad, who hadn't moved an inch since I'd asked them to sit. I drummed my fingernails against the glass.

Mosswhistle stirred from where it had been snoozing, curled up in the material of my dress like a hatchling in a nest. "Mistress's Craft finished?"

"It's finished," I announced, my voice gravelly.

My gaze fixed on the girls, my heart thudding in my chest.

I stood, my legs barking in protest from where they'd been curled under me, and Mosswhistle yelped as the dress was pulled from

underneath it.

"Bethel." I extended a hand to the girl closest to me, pulling her to her feet. Her red hair was tied in a limp, low ponytail, her skin pale and sickly in the greenish dawn light trickling through the canopy of plants.

I wet my lips. "Will you drink this for me?" I asked, holding out the vial. "Just two mouthfuls."

That should be enough for the petite girl.

She stared at me vacantly, her head tilting to one side.

"Drink this, Bethel," I tried, more firmly this time, before I started doubting that this was a good idea.

Nothing.

"Broken," Mosswhistle muttered quietly from my side, reaching over to pat Bethel's knee.

A lump built in my throat.

I knew the brownie probably meant she was broken in a practical sense—that she wasn't functioning as a human should. But the word seeped through me like a poison, settling in my bones.

These humans were broken in so many ways by the fae.

Their bodies, bruised and undernourished...and their spirits broken, leaving them an empty shell.

Tears pricked at my eyes. I had seen humans broken before, in Rosehill, suffering through grief or ill health or periods of darkness. But this… This was different. A simple ensorcellment had taken away everything these girls were, everything they loved. The ability to laugh, to cry, to feel *anything*…

"Mosswhistle, will you try asking her?" My voice was thick. Perhaps a faery giving her instructions would make a difference.

The brownie looked up at me, surprise widening its eyes. "Human girls are Mistress's servants. Should listen to her."

"Even so." I forced a smile onto my face. "Will you ask them?"

"Drink two mouthfuls of Mistress's Craft," the brownie squeaked firmly, wagging a finger. I placed the vial in Bethel's clammy hand.

As I'd guessed, the direct order from one of the fae seemed to stir something in her. Bethel's throat bobbed as she took two long drafts of the antidote. I took the vial back from her and waited.

She stood, unmoving, each second dragging by as my gaze raked over every inch of her, trying to spot a loosening in her posture, color rushing back into her cheeks, any sign it had affected her.

"It not work?" Mosswhistle's voice was laced with disappointment.

I shook my head, doubtful, a creeping sense of failure edging through my body.

Maybe I hadn't used enough faerie fruit? I'd tried the same amount as in the antidote I'd made for Ava's faesickness, but maybe

ensorcellment was stronger.

Or perhaps I'd been mistaken trying the folkshade—

Bethel blinked, her light-green eyes sharpening. She blinked again a few times, then staggered back a step. My arm shot out to grip her and hold her upright.

"Wh-where—" Bethel's gaze darted around, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Her lips parted, hanging half-open, her eyes wide.

It worked. Hope flickered to life in my chest.

I had figured out how to cure fae ensorcellment...and I still had a cauldron full of the antidote.

"You're fine, you're safe." My soothing greenwitch tone came to me naturally, one hand going to hers.

She twisted in my grip. "Where—who—"

"My name's Aster." I held her tighter, forcing her to meet my eyes. "I'm a greenwitch. You were sick, but I healed you." Feeling her muscles loosen, I let go of her arm.

Bethel's shoulders lowered a fraction, then tensed again at the sight of Mosswhistle.

"This is my…assistant, Mosswhistle," I said quickly. "It helped me look after you."

The brownie gave a small bow.

Bethel's eyes darted around us again, skimming over the cauldron, the plants, the pink dawn light creeping into the glasshouse.

I swallowed. "I don't know how much you remember. But you're in a glasshouse in the Sky Court…"

Bethel nodded, her eyes shining with tears. "I... I was chosen at the Tithe." She faltered, her hands going to her hair, raking through the tangled ends.

I winced. Her voice sounded completely different now that she was free of the ensorcellment. Clearer, higher.

She drew in a shaky breath. "I remember a cloud of glittering dust. And then waking up here, in the Sky Court. There was a glowing male fae, like we used to see when we traveled into town... He was beautiful. He spoke to me and… That's all I remember." She began to shake.

I winced, her story echoing elements of my own. "You were ensorcelled by one of the Sky Court fae," I explained in the same low, calm voice. "You've been ensorcelled the whole time you've been here, working for them as a servant."

Bethel clasped her hands to her chest, her mouth opening again.

My hand jerked up, ready to clamp over her lips if she screamed.

"If you feel okay," I said as calmly as I could, "I need to give the antidote to your friend…" If that was the right word. Would the girls even have known each other before they came to the Sky Court?

I leaned down to help Mariyad to her feet. The girl was a head taller than me but about half my size, she was so thin.

Bethel's gaze dropped to Mariyad, and her mouth closed into a tight, trembling line, emotion ricocheting across her expression. "Mari…"

So they did know each other.

"They never told us," Bethel hissed out between tight lips. "They never told us what happened after we were chosen. We thought…" Her voice gave out, lowering to something more similar to when she'd spoken under ensorcellment. "We thought we were doing something to help. Keeping the peace. It was an honor…" Her gaze flicked back to Mariyad's unseeing eyes and slack face.

A lump formed in my throat. To look at, Bethel had reminded me of my sister Laurel. But the way she spoke reminded me of Ava.

I didn't know what to tell her. How different my experience with the fae...with Thorne had been. That she *was* keeping the peace...just at a terrible price.

"I've got an antidote for Mariyad too," I said weakly, holding up the vial, the dull purple liquid sloshing against the glass.

I pressed the antidote into Mariyad's hands and asked Mosswhistle to make the same request as before. Mariyad obediently drank while we watched her in silence.

"How long does it take?" Bethel whispered, her voice trembling slightly. Her eyes didn't leave her friend for a second.

I glanced at Mariyad, taking the rest of the antidote from her and corking it. "Just a few moments," I assured her.

Bethel nodded, tears still shining in her eyes, her mouth set in a thin line. "And now what do we do? Do you have a way to get us out of here?"

It was a good question.

What now?

"You're the only ones who've had the antidote so far," I explained, "but there's enough for all the servants here, and if there isn't, I'll make more." I glanced back at Mariyad, who was still standing motionless before us. "But we need to wait until I can figure out a way to get everyone out. After the Trials..." The plan formed in my head as I spoke. The Sky Court loved pomp and ceremony. There was no way there wouldn't be an elaborate ball or dinner or crowning for the winner.

The perfect distraction for getting the ensorcelled servants out of the palace regardless of whether Thorne won.

"And until then?" Bethel insisted.

"You've both been assigned to me as my maids," I explained, "so as long as you stay in my room, you should escape the notice of any

other fae. I'll bring you food."

Bethel bit her lip but nodded. "We can do that."

Mariyad closed her eyes and swayed, and we jolted to hold her up on either side. Mosswhistle stood in front of her, bracing its spindly arms like it would catch her if she toppled over.

"Mari?" Bethel put a hand to her friend's face.

Mariyad gave a sharp inhale, and her eyes flickered open, the cloudiness leaving her irises and revealing a deep brown.

Bethel let out a relieved huff, and I allowed myself a small smile.

There was no doubt about it. The antidote worked.

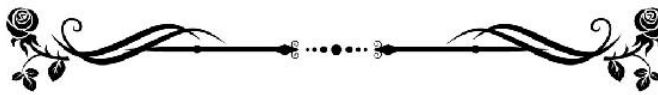
But Mariyad's eyes widened with fear, her brown skin turning ashen. "F-Fae!" she shrieked, pointing a finger.

A curl of cool air wrapped around us, stirring her dark hair and rustling my skirts.

Her screams rang in my ears as I followed her gesture, expecting to see Mosswhistle.

Only instead, the dark silhouette of a fae male stood in the open doorway, fists clenched at his side.

Chapter Twenty-Four



THE fiGURE STEPPED FORWARD, and the tension in my gut released almost at once as I recognized the strong slope of his shoulders, the broad chest, the dark sweep of his hair.

"Aster. Thank Folk," Thorne growled as he strode toward us, his brows lowered in concern. "I thought you'd been…" He halted, his gaze flicking to the girls at my side.

Mariyad hadn't stopped screaming. She pressed her hands over her ears, tears streaming down her face.

What little color had returned to Bethel's cheeks drained straight out again, her face white as marble.

I turned my back to Thorne, pulling down Mariyad's hands from her ears.

"Mariyad, listen," I pleaded. "You're safe now, look at me. *Look at me.*" I gripped both of her wrists, but she just began wriggling wildly, like a frantic bird caught between my hands.

"Let me." Bethel shoved me gently but firmly aside, reaching for Mariyad's hands. "Mari, it's me. I'm here now. We're okay."

Mariyad stopped screaming but panted heavily, hyperventilating as her gaze met her friend's. "B-Beth?"

Bethel nodded, her knuckles white as she gripped Mariyad's hands in hers. "You were sick, we both were, but we're safe now. We're with —friends." Her gaze slid back to Thorne and me, uncertain once more.

I hastily nodded, stepping forward, lifting my hands. "I'm a greenwitch—a human—see?" I tucked my hair behind my ears so she could see their rounded tips. "I know this is overwhelming, but I promise you, you're safe now. I won't let anything happen to you."

I felt rather than saw Thorne at my other side, a slight flicker of shadow, the rich, metallic scent of magic heavy in the air. The girls cowered back.

"I can calm her…" His low voice tickled my ear.

I stiffened. He meant to ensorcel her again?

"You will do no such thing," I hissed under my breath. "I've only just cured them."

"You've *what*?"

I turned back to the girls, ignoring him and forcing a smile onto my face. “It’s okay. This is Thorne. He’s my…” I trailed off.

He’s my what? He wasn’t my mate, by fae standards, or a husband by human ones. Lover seemed too frivolous... “My friend,” I finished lamely.

“Aster—” Thorne pressed.

“Bethel,” I interrupted him, turning to the redhead with a smile fixed on my face. “Will you tell Mariyad everything I’ve just told you? I just need a—ah—a minute. With Thorne.”

The shorter girl threw Thorne another wary glance, but she gave me a stiff nod, her back straightening before she led Mariyad to one side.

I turned to face Thorne, the fae’s whole body tense as a bow string. And aimed at me.

“I’ve been worried.” He ran a hand through his dark hair. “You said you were leaving with Vanna, then when you didn’t return with her… I followed your scent out back, where the other humans had gathered.” His throat bobbed. “I feared the worst… That Neve had somehow captured you or tricked you into fighting…”

He looked so pained that my heart tugged me toward him, but I locked my knees.

“And when you realized it wasn’t *me* fighting for fae entertainment, you just left?” I tried and failed to keep the bite out of my voice.

“I looked for you everywhere. I’ve been searching all night. You know it’s morning already?” He stepped closer, his hands skimming up my arms to rest on my shoulders. He’d missed my point entirely. “I got the Little Folk to check your chambers first, then Vanna’s. Then I shadowed into almost every room in the Sky Court.”

I pressed my lips together, tilting my chin to stare up at him. I wasn’t going to apologize for leaving the ball without telling him.

Thorne’s gaze flicked toward the two girls whispering quietly. “What are you doing here, Aster? You said you cured the servants. Cured them from what, exactly?”

“From being under fae influence. I’ve made an antidote.”

“You’ve made an antidote to ensorcellment?” Disbelief laced his tone. “But that’s…unheard of.”

“I’m an enchantress,” I asserted. “I figured it out.”

“You *enchanted* the antidote?” Thorne dropped his arms from my shoulders, shadows misting from him like steam.

I tried to ignore the burning in my stomach. “I didn’t tell you before because—”

“How long have you been enchanting in secret?” Thorne interrupted. “You promised me you wouldn’t.”

"I said I wouldn't enchant in the Trials. This is different."

His hazel eyes flashed. "And what are you going to do with these girls now, Aster? If any of the other champions discover them, how're you going to explain it?"

My breath hitched. "No one *will* find out. They'll stay in my room. The other champions can't come in—"

"And what about Faolan? They're Tithe humans—they belong to this Court. The Tithe works both ways to keep the Treaty in place. If you free the humans that are rightfully his, Faolan is allowed to hurt the non-Tithe humans living in his lands."

A hot rush of shame pooled in my core. I hadn't considered the consequences of freeing the servants…but that didn't mean I was wrong. The *Tithes* were wrong. Bethel and Mariyad shouldn't belong to anyone.

I bit back the words I wanted to snap at Thorne, instead returning my attention to the girls. Mariyad had stopped crying, although she still clutched Bethel's hand. Their hushed whispers faded as I approached them.

"Thank you, Aster," Mariyad said at once, her cheeks still glistening with drying tears. "For bringing us back."

My heart clenched. How much had they heard of what Thorne had said?

"You're welcome..." I beckoned the brownie over. "Mosswhistle, please escort the girls back to my chambers. Take them through the servant passages, and make sure you're not seen by any of the fae."

"Of course, Mistress," the brownie trilled, puffing out its chest.

Hopefully most of the Court Fae would be sleeping off their folkshade hangovers this morning anyway.

I reached for the necklace of rowan beads around my neck, unfastening them as I addressed the girls. "These are rowan beads," I explained, moving to where I'd left some gardening tools scattered over the ground and scooping up a pair of sharp pruning clippers. "Cut the iron wire in half and make a bracelet for each of you. Keep them hidden."

"*Aster*." Thorne's disapproval was clear from his tone, but I acted like I hadn't heard him.

"They'll stop you from being ensorcelled again should you be discovered. Wait in my chambers until I come back for you."

Bethel took the necklace and clippers then dragged Mariyad to her feet. Fixing me with a fierce expression, she nodded firmly. "Thank you, Aster," she said, echoing her friend's earlier words.

The two of them followed Mosswhistle out of the glasshouses, their frail bodies moving with a purpose I'd never seen before. Thorne had left the door wide open, but they clicked it closed behind them.

Already, the cold from outside had seeped in, replacing the thick, warm air with a crisp, wintry breeze.

I spun back to Thorne.

He was still dressed in his pristine, forest-green suit from the ball, while my gown was a mess, stained with wine and now dirt and plants from my work. He watched me with an unreadable look on his face.

He shook his head. "What are you thinking, giving away your rowan beads? Now Neve or Faolan can—"

"Everyone already knows I have the beads," I interrupted. "No one will know I'm no longer wearing them."

"It's an unnecessary risk."

A pressure built behind my eyes. "At least *I'm* doing something to help the Tithe humans trapped here."

"Aster, that's not fair."

"Oh, it's not?" I wrenched up the scissors and measures and tossed them into an empty crate.

"You know I don't agree with treating Tithe humans badly. I didn't allow any human servants at the Cursed Court."

I scooped up a handful of leftover folkshade, the stems limp in my hands. "You might not treat them badly yourself, Thorne, but you allow others to do whatever terrible notion takes their fancy without challenging them."

Thorne exhaled. "Fae politics… Our thinking… It moves slower than human thinking does. We live for longer, so it takes longer for new ideas to take root, for old prejudices to die out. It's difficult for you to understand, Aster."

"Don't patronize me," I snapped, gripping the plants tightly in my fist. "I'm not a child."

"I know you're not," Thorne protested. "I'm just saying, fae life spans are so much longer than human. Centuries to you are the equivalent of decades for us."

I turned away from him, dropping the cuttings into a bucket and moving it to the side of the glasshouse, where there was a small wire rack for gardening tools.

Thorne trailed after me, speaking in a low voice. "When my father introduced the Tithe, after he was made Alder King, it caused uproar. It was seen as too forward-thinking. Before that, all humans were seen as fair game for the fae—as slaves, or sport, or *worse*. The Tithes are the price of the Treaty. A small number of humans, given to the fae, in exchange for the majority of humans to live untouched, protected. My Father made life better for most humans, and then he ruled firmly enough to keep the peace these last two and a half centuries."

My jaw set, but I didn't say anything. I swept back to move the cauldron filled with the leftover antidote, then slowly rolled up the

burlap I'd spread across the floor.

"It was an incredibly controversial law," Thorne continued. "That's why my father treated my friends and me so harshly after Eila's death. If he hadn't punished us, there would have been fresh uprisings in the other Courts—the ones who were against the Treaty."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I'd wanted Thorne to become the Alder King because I thought we shared the same opinions about humans. The same dream of a better future.

I stopped what I was doing. "So you think the Tithes are a good thing?"

Thorne inhaled slowly, weighing his words. "The Treaty not to harm humans is a good thing. The Tithes were a necessary step toward making change."

"And the Tithe humans…?"

Thorne paused to consider again, his mouth opening to find the words. But there were no words that would placate me.

"Are a sacrifice?" I finished for him.

"Aster—"

"I need to know." I stood slowly from the ground. "If you become Alder King, do you plan to abolish the Tithes?"

"If I become king, I will work toward a world where all humans are treated fairly," he replied evenly.

"Fairly by whose standards?" I demanded. "Answer the question, Thorne. It's a simple yes or no answer—no fae maneuvering needed." I spoke in a firm voice. "Do you plan to abolish the Tithes?"

My stomach burned as I stood before the fae I loved, challenging him. Something wild seared through my veins.

But in this moment, we were not Aster and Thorne.

We were a human enchantress and a fae prince, debating the future of our people.

Thorne said nothing, fists tightly clenched at his side. After several heartbeats, he spoke. "When I am Alder King, I hope to change fae minds about humans and make progress toward a more equal system. Like my father did." He swallowed. "I do plan to abolish the Tithes… *eventually*. But to take over and remove them entirely... It could send the kingdom into a civil war that would result in the deaths of thousands of both fae and humans."

Eventually.

The word resounded around my mind.

Eventually wouldn't benefit a single human alive today.

Eventually by fae standards could still mean centuries of the Tithes continuing.

Thorne talked about humans in an unemotional and detached way because he wasn't one. But I was human. It was my people who would

suffer. And their mistreatment lit a fire in my belly.

"I'm a Tithe human, Thorne. It was pure luck I was sent to your Court. I could have been born in the lands supplying humans for the Shadow Court, or the Frost Court, or *here*. The girls I cured—they could have been me or my sisters."

Thorne's throat bobbed, and he took a swift step toward me. "Aster—"

"You only want to protect me because you love me. You don't feel that responsibility toward the other Tithe humans. You see me differently, like I'm special."

"You are special."

"To *you*, Thorne."

"No. You're kind and clever and powerful," he began, his hazel eyes glinting with conviction.

"So are plenty of other humans." My voice wavered for the first time, emotion thickening my throat. "I just happened to be the one you fell in love with, the human in your story. But every one of those Tithe humans has their own story. Fae think our lives are so fleeting, that we're only important if we're talented at Craft or beautiful enough to catch the eye of a faery."

Thorne opened his mouth to protest, but I cut across him. "Every human life is worthwhile. Even if it's a simple one. Every human should have the chance to live freely, not under the shadow of the Tithes claiming them or their children. We should be allowed to rule ourselves, decide our own futures."

A hot tear slid down my cheek.

"Aster, if an Alder King or Queen decreed that humans could rule themselves, war would break out within the year. Think of how many lives would be lost."

Frustration bubbled in my chest. "*Fae* lives, maybe. And how many human lives have been sacrificed to the Tithes over the years?"

I began pacing. It felt like this argument was going in circles, like I couldn't make Thorne understand. Like his innate *fae-ness* made it impossible for him to comprehend how I felt.

He loved me, and he would die to protect me, but could he not understand that every human life was worth the same as mine?

"Aster, I promise you, when I become Alder King, I will work to give humans as much freedom as possible. I will look into the best way to abolish the Tithe, but you have to understand, the Tithes are one of the traditions that hold the fabric of the kingdom together. The Courts weren't always united under one king. We have to honor traditions to keep the peace." He gestured around us. "It's one of the reasons we're all here for the Alder Trials."

I folded my arms across my chest, swallowing hard. "Just because

something is traditional doesn't mean it's the best way."

"I agree." Thorne's strained voice softened. "There are some faerie traditions I don't like. Do you think I want to kill my own father to become king? But I have to, and I don't think—"

"*Wait*." Horror rose in my chest, pressing cold hands around my throat. "You have to *kill* your father?"

"The winner of the Alder Trials must kill the existing Alder King," Thorne explained matter-of-factly. "It's how the transition of power takes place. Only the champion who wins can take the Alder Crown. There's a ceremony after the third Trial."

All of the breath seemed to whoosh from my lungs in a painful gasp. "So if you win… You'll just… You'll kill him." The words tumbled from my lips.

I couldn't imagine killing my father for *any* reason, especially not for a crown. I would never harm a hair on anyone in my family's head.

Thorne's gaze dropped to his feet. The glasshouse had lightened during our arguing, so I could see him properly now. His expression was somber, but conviction still lit his eyes.

"I've always known my father would die at these Trials," he said. "If it wasn't at my hand, it would be one of the other champions. And whoever takes up the mantle accepts that their life will end at the following Alder Trials. It's the cost of ruling."

The idea of lives being sacrificed in the name of power and tradition were apparently quite ingrained in the fae.

But how could they be so callous? Why wasn't Thorne questioning such a barbaric rite?

He looked at me with a pained expression. "I'm sorry I've upset you tonight," he said, his voice a low rumble. "I love you, Aster. And I do care about the welfare of all humans. You wanted me to become the Alder King, remember? You convinced me it was my duty. And you were right. I'm the best choice. Now you have to trust that I know how to rule my people."

I straightened my spine.

Only fae should be bound by their laws.

I turned my back to Thorne, hooking the cauldron on my arm like a basket, the metal warm against my skin from where I'd been gripping it so tightly. The rest of the antidote sloshed inside, its bitter smell filling my nostrils.

I needed to be alone for a while, to sort through all of the thoughts whirling through my mind. And to find somewhere safe in my chambers to store the rest of the antidote.

"Aster, please don't go." Thorne's voice was pained.

I turned at the door, glancing back at him. My heart gave a tug to

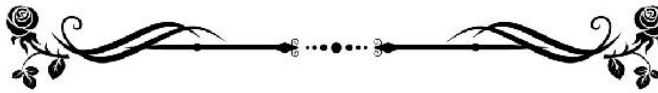
see his hand outstretched toward me. “So whoever kills the Alder King becomes the rightful heir to Faerie?” I clarified, my voice carefully neutral.

Thorne lowered his hand when he realized I wasn’t coming back to take it. “They have to have won the Trials…but yes. The winning champion becomes the Alder Heir. The power of the Alder Crown passes to them when they kill the current monarch.”

A seed planted deep in the back of my mind, cutting through the horror of everything I’d just learned.

I nodded once, then spun on my heel, leaving Thorne in the glasshouse and emerging into the sunrise.

Chapter Twenty-Five



I KEPT my head down as I brushed through the crowd of Court Fae gathered in the throne room. Silk banners in the colors of the three remaining champions' Courts fluttered from the high ceilings—frost white, sky blue, and forest green. Shrieks and cackles and silvery laughter swelled around me, the whole room perfumed with the sickly scent of faerie wine.

Not only was the entire Sky Court present this afternoon, but so were the entourages from every Fae Court. Anticipation prickled in the air. Each time the far doors opened, heads snapped toward them, the fae all waiting for the guest of honor to arrive.

The Alder King.

Apparently, it was tradition for the reigning monarch to attend the final Trial and stay until the coronation, three days later.

My lips downturned, remembering what I had learned from Thorne. That the coronation would double as an execution.

"Aster—hey!" Vanna grabbed my arm as I slipped past her. Her dark, braided hair was piled above her head, and she wore a glinting gold tiara studded with rubies. "Meet me in the armory after this? I have a gift for you."

Was this a peace offering after what had happened the night of the ball?

As if Vanna could sense I was about to decline, she added, "It's armor for the third Trial. From my Court."

I wasn't in a position to turn down anything that could help me in the final Trial, especially not armor from the Metal Court.

I nodded stiffly. "Thank you."

Her brow creased as she took in my tight expression, the hunch of my shoulders. "Aster, are you—"

I slipped back into the crowd before she could say anything else. I didn't want to answer questions right now. Even if I couldn't afford to turn down Vanna's offer of the armor, that didn't mean I owed her an explanation about why a scowl had been stamped across my face in the two days since I'd seen the fae betting on those terrible human games.

A shudder wracked my body, and for a moment I couldn't breathe. It wasn't just Thorne who didn't think that the Tithes ought to be abolished immediately. Even Vanna had tried to defend the fae who'd ensorcelled my people to rip each other apart.

There was only one Court Fae who I thought might help me now.

It took me several minutes of searching before I caught sight of her, high above me. Aurora was deep in conversation with several other Sky Court fae, their wings a blur as they hovered in the air.

"Aurora!" I called up to her, beckoning her down. She made her excuses and dropped down lightly beside me, her peach-gold hair pouring over her shoulder. The crowd parted to make room for their princess.

"Can we talk?" I asked in a low voice, not waiting for her to reply before taking her arm and leading her to the edge of the room.

"Shouldn't you be on the dais with the other champions?"

I cut a glance to the far end of the room. Neve gazed imperiously down at everyone else, clad in a dress of glittering white. Beside her, Thorne was her opposite, garbed in black, his hands clasped behind him. I'd felt his eyes burning into my back as I'd made my way across the room, and he watched me with Aurora now.

I pursed my lips. I'd been avoiding him since our fight in the glasshouse. And I doubted his father's arrival would be a good time to pick up our debate.

"I'll head there in a second," I said. "I just need to ask you a favor first."

"A favor?" A slight wrinkle creased Aurora's fair brow as she fixed me with a long look. "You want to make a faerie bargain with me?"

"Silver bells, no!" A few people turned in our direction at the sound of my raised voice, and I hurriedly composed myself. I cleared my throat. "No, *not* a bargain," I emphasized. "A favor. Between… friends. Like how you helped me with a dress for the Winter Solstice Ball, for nothing in return."

"You consider us friends?" Aurora sounded a little surprised but pleased. "So you want another favor, and you don't want to do anything for me in return?"

"Exactly. Yes." I was used to Aurora's forthright way of speaking by now, and she didn't look put out by my suggestion, so I plowed on. "I'd like you to take two of my servants, let them stay in your rooms, and hide them from all other fae."

"Why?" Aurora cocked her head to one side, her blue eyes wide.

"Because…" I blew out a breath and lowered my voice to a whisper. "Because I know you care for humans, Aurora. Or that you cared very deeply for one…"

A flush rose to the sky princess's cheeks.

“You’re the only one in the Sky Court I can trust to be kind to my servants now that… Now that their ensorcellment has been lifted.”

Aurora hesitated, then arched one delicate eyebrow. “How?”

“I cured them.”

“*How*?” she insisted.

I glanced around to make sure we weren’t being overheard, then up overhead to check no sprite or pixie was fluttering above us.

“With an enchantment,” I muttered. “Aurora, I know Faolan has told you what humans are capable of...and I saw how you treated your seamstresses regardless of what he’s said.” I stepped closer, worry tightening my voice. I didn’t have a backup plan if Aurora didn’t agree. “It won’t be forever, but if something happens to me in the final Trial… If I don’t survive, I want to know they’ll be safe.”

Aurora cupped both of her hands around my face, her skin like sunlight, warming my cheeks. She peered closely into my eyes, and a thrill of panic ran through me as her sharp, slender fingers tightened. “I will take care of your human servants,” she said finally.

“Thank you.” The words rushed from my lips in an exhale.

Aurora’s hands dropped from my cheeks, her pointed ears pricking, then she glanced toward the huge doors into the throne room. She blinked. “You should get back to the other champions.”

I guessed her fae hearing had picked up on sounds from the other side of the door. From the sudden hush that settled over the room of fae, they all had.

The Alder King had arrived.

I hurried back through the crowd, the skirts of my dress bunched in my hands. I was in neither Faolan’s nor Thorne’s colors today. Instead, I’d opted for a simple cotton gown in a human style, with a floral print and curved, white collar.

I reached the stairs to the dais slightly out of breath, then joined Thorne and Neve.

And not a moment too soon. The tall doors flew open, and the gathered crowd parted as a procession of unfamiliar fae spilled through.

Thorne had come alone from the Forest Court, but his father, it seemed, had not.

Willowy woodland nymphs with green and gold skin leaped through the doorway, moss and velvet grasses springing up where their dainty feed landed, even though the floor was polished marble.

Horned dryads danced in after them, wearing sculptural outfits fashioned entirely from leaves and bark. In their wake, smaller pixies and goblins and imps appeared, throwing handfuls of leaves and petals like confetti along the velvety moss path the nymphs were creating.

I shuddered.

It looked like the Tithe path.

A dozen Court Fae followed next, draped in dark-green robes, a circlet of alder leaves on each of their beautiful brows. Each carried a large fern, bigger than any I'd seen growing naturally. They stopped in pairs along the mossy path, holding the fronds aloft to form an archway.

The scent reached me then, a smell that conjured memories of rain hissing through leaves and freshly cut meadows.

The Alder King stepped onto the path.

He wore the same luxurious robes as the other Forest Court fae, but threaded with a shimmering bronze. A flowing cape of leaves rustled behind him as he walked.

I knew he was old...and yet his angular face looked to be in its youth. There were no lines around his hazel-green eyes or furrowing his brow. His skin was the silvery-white of birchwood, and his long, fawn-brown hair fell past his shoulders in soft waves. A slender, white crown circled his head, reminding me of brambles, of tangled antlers.

As he got closer, my breathing hitched.

The sharp angles of his face reminded me instantly of Thorne, although the king didn't have that same pressure of power humming around him. There was something different, more ancient...

As the Alder King reached the dais, Faolan swiftly materialized from the crowd, stepping forward to greet him. "Your Majesty." The sky prince swept into a courtly bow. "Welcome to the Sky Court."

"Silvius to you, Faolan." The king gave him a familiar clap on the shoulder, although his lip lifted into a sneer. I suddenly remembered Faolan had grown up in the Forest Court as the king's ward.

Thorne's long fingers tapped against his leg as the Alder King stepped up to the dais, taking in Neve, his son, and me. The three remaining champions.

"Well…" he announced. "What a fascinating line-up of potential executioners…"

There was no accusation in his voice. It was said with *humor*. The crowd laughed behind him, although I stiffened.

The Alder King stopped before Neve, who smiled as she dropped into a perfect curtsey, her white skirts shimmering like ice.

"Fierce Neve of the Frost Court, reports say you are every bit as strong and unyielding as your mother. I am not surprised to find you in the final Trial."

I wondered what run-ins Silvius might have had with Neve's mother throughout his rule, if their politics really were as different as Thorne had said.

The king stepped to the left, a weary look furrowing his brow at

the sight of his son standing stiffly with his hands clasped behind him. His gaze raked over Thorne's black outfit with an aggrieved exhale. "My wayward son… You couldn't find anything to wear in your family's colors?"

"Father," was all Thorne replied, inclining his head slightly.

"Sartorial choices aside," the king continued. "I am pleased to see you are taking the Alder Trials seriously… I've gotten used to the Alder Crown residing in the Forest Court."

Thorne remained silent.

Realizing his son wasn't planning to respond, Silvius gave a barely audible sigh, then stepped toward me. That shiver of ancient power ran over me again and my gaze was inexplicably drawn back to the crown on his head.

This close, I realized it was made of bone.

The king steepled his fingers. "I have been intrigued by tales of *you*. The first human to ever enter the Trials, let alone make it to the final round…" His eyes sharpened with curiosity, and as I stared into them, I realized they were the only part of him that showed his age, the depth of knowledge and memory deep as a well.

"Your Majesty." My voice was husky as I sank into a deep curtsey, lowering my lashes to avoid the weight of his gaze. When I righted myself, the Alder King was still watching me.

"Such a curious young woman." He leaned closer, his chin tilted as if to breathe in my scent. I resisted the urge to pull back. "You didn't just break the curse and free my son—you captured his heart." His gaze flicked to Thorne. "I found him a changed male, but not in the way I'd expected." Silvius turned back to me. "My son didn't return home for months after the curse was broken because he was looking for you. He said he didn't care about entering the Alder Trials, that you were all that mattered." The king's words were mild, but his eyes were shrewd. "A human girl worth more than the Alder Crown?"

My mouth dried. Did he expect me to answer him? Neither of the other champions had replied.

He finally stepped back. "I look forward to learning more of you, Aster of the Sky Court."

"It's Aster Wilden," I corrected. "Your Majesty," I added quickly, dipping my head as heat rushed to my cheeks.

Why did I say that?

He blinked. "Your family name?"

I nodded, my gut churning.

A smile tilted his lips. "I look forward to learning more of you, Aster *Wilden*."

Faolan ushered us off the dais, and I was only too glad to melt into the throng of fae gathered around the base, all eyes on their monarch.

The Alder King swept his leafy cloak behind him and cleared his throat.

"Gentlefolk… I am honored to be here," his voice rang through the room, "to attend the Alder Trials, the most sacred rite of our Faerie Kingdom, one that opens the crown to *any* of the ten Courts so that our rule might be fair. Enduring long enough to ensure stability, but not as long as our lifetimes, to ensure change. I have ruled for my two and half centuries, and now the champion who slays me will rightfully rule over us for the same time, their word becoming law. The seat of the Alder King or Queen will move to the Court of whichever champion emerges victorious."

My gaze slid around the room. Despite the division between the Courts, everyone was listening attentively, respectfully, even.

Nausea pooled in my stomach. How could the king speak so casually of his own death? How could the gathered crowd watch him talking, in perfect health, knowing he would be murdered by the end of the week?

The seed that had planted in the back of my mind began to germinate, the sick feeling in my stomach twisting with guilt.

Thorne seemed to think humans would never be able to rule themselves...but what if a human won their Trials? Surely that would prove we were just as worthy of ruling as the fae?

My heart thudded against my breastbone.

What would it mean if I became the rightful Queen of Faerie? I could stop the Tithes, extend the Treaty to protect all humans, set up a Court for humans to govern themselves…

Goosebumps prickled over my skin. Of course, that idea ignored every practicality. It would be near impossible for me to best Thorne and Neve. I'd spent all of my time in the Sky Court convincing Thorne *he* should win.

And even if I somehow won, Faolan would claim my victory as his own…

Unless *I* killed the Alder King first.

My gaze shifted to the green-clad king on the stage.

There were three days between the final Trial and the coronation. The voice in the back of my mind whispered I could do it if I were clever enough. My body trembled at the sheer magnitude of the idea unfurling in my mind.

Could I betray Thorne like that? Strip him of his chance to become the Alder King? After I'd encouraged him to win—persuaded him to take these Trials seriously and claim his birthright?

His smoke and rosewood scent and the pressure of his magic lingered in the air.

But it wasn't only Thorne's fate at stake here. The memory of the

humans forced to compete in Neve's sick games thrust itself into my mind again, visions of vacant eyes and bloodied fingers and ripped skin swimming before my eyes. If I took the Alder Crown, I could make sure no fae was allowed to ensorcel a human like that.

I sucked in my lower lip as my treacherous thoughts eddied and whirled, deaf to the speech that continued on the stage. Then polite applause and fae whooping jerked me out of my reverie.

Unclenching my fists, I made for the door. I couldn't stay in this room a moment longer, not with Thorne so close, or the Alder King.

A knuckle grazed the back of my arm, and I halted at the coarse voice that followed. "Where are you going, petal?"

I turned back to Thorne. "Vanna asked me to meet her in the armory. She said she has something to gift me," I told him, glad to have a truthful excuse for leaving.

He nodded, his posture relaxing slightly. "Would you like me to accompany you?"

"No," I said, too quickly. Hurt flashed in his eyes. "I just—need to be away from all this." I fanned my hand. "And with the last Trial tomorrow, I want to get an early night."

Thorne nodded, and I turned sharply on my heel, a horrible, dropping sensation in my stomach as I made for the door. I couldn't wait to get out of this room full of fae.

Before I reached it, a hot hand grasped my arm, and I twisted around. "*Thorne*—"

"Even better." Faolan's cool expression greeted me, his flawless complexion appearing lit from within. "Come with me."

Not giving me any say in the matter, he linked my arm through his so he could steer me toward the side of the room. To an outsider, the gesture would have looked courteous, but his long fingers gripped me so tightly it hurt. He led me through an archway that opened up to an empty balcony.

Crisp air lifted goosebumps on my skin the moment we stepped outside, and I pulled away from him, examining my arms for bruises before wrapping them around myself.

"What is it, Faolan?" I demanded. "I have somewhere to be."

The sky prince twitched his delicate wings, but his face remained perfectly composed. This close, I could smell his scent of fresh air and sun-dried cotton. His blond hair gleamed like gold.

A frisson of anxiety stirred deep in me. *Everything* about him was made to lure a human in, and I'd fallen for it before.

I took a step back.

He smiled cordially. "I have some advice for you, Aster."

"I don't need your advice," I replied briskly, turning to head back inside.

“Your loss,” he cooed in a singsong voice. “It’s about the third Trial.”

I paused, weighing up his words, then slowly turned back to find him studying his long nails with a smug smile.

“You’re going to tell me what the Trial is?”

Faolan shook his head. “There are rules against hosts divulging that information. But I can tell you what will be tested. I want to convince you to try to win.”

Despite the frigid air, heat crept up my back. Had Faolan realized I’d been considering the same thing?

I crossed my arms. “Last time I accepted help from you, you tricked me into faerie bargains. So forgive me if I’m not jumping at the chance again.”

He held up his hands. “I swear to you, this will not extend our bargains. But I want you to win. Which is why I’m telling you that the third trial will test the champions’ strengths as warriors.”

Great.

I was no warrior. And Thorne and Neve certainly were.

“It’s difficult to test physical strength alone,” Faolan continued, his eyes glinting in the light, “when the fae can use their magic to do so much.”

My heart jumped into my throat, the meaning of his words sinking in.

“Thorne and Neve won’t have magic?”

Faolan took a step closer, his lips brushing my ear as he whispered. “You’ll have yours.”

A shiver prickled up my spine as I turned away from him. “So enchanting doesn’t count as fae m—”

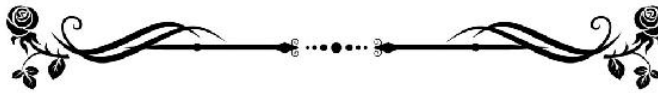
I twisted back around, but Faolan had disappeared, leaving me alone.

I clutched at my arms. If Faolan wasn’t trying to trick me again, it sounded like the final Trial was going to be weighted in my favor, just as Thorne and I had suspected it might be.

That it would be possible for me, a human, to win the Alder Trials.

If I revealed my enchantment…

Chapter Twenty-Six



SNOW WHIRLED DOWN IN THICK, fast flurries. Tiny, lit-up fae glowing a faint gray-blue dashed among the snowflakes, the beat of their wings ringing like chimes. Although every inch of me was covered in heavy wool and fur, the sharp cold still bit against my cheeks. I felt sluggish, slow, and not just from the frigid temperatures—Vanna's gifted armor was sandwiched between an underlayer of sheepskin and a heavy overcoat.

Wetting my lips, I tasted blood where they had cracked. My eyelids were strangely slow and sticky when I blinked.

The three of us—the final champions remaining in the Alder Trials—stood opposite Faolan in the middle of a vast clearing in the woods, the air fraught with snow and a hazy, freezing mist that curled between the huge pine trees stretching above us. Wooden balconies nestled in their canopies, where the other fae had gathered to watch us. The other champions and their entourages, the Alder King, the Sky Court...all of them.

I jumped as a gloved hand brushed mine.

Thorne's fingers wound awkwardly around mine, clinging fiercely onto me. Every line of his body was written through with tension, his shoulders set, his back straight. He twisted his head back and forth, surveying what little we could make out amidst the frantic snow.

His fingers tightened suddenly. "I know we fought," he said in a low voice, "but you know I'll protect you in today's Trial. We're still stronger together."

Guilt twisted my insides, a tingling feeling sweeping down my arms. Of course Thorne would try to protect me...but I knew something he didn't.

For this final Trial, he'd be stripped of his magic.

The advantage he had been depending on, of wielding magic from every one of the Fae Courts, would be lost to him.

And I hadn't warned him.

I blew out a breath that clouded in the air. "We'll protect each other," I said, not meeting his eyes.

The horns sounded above us, echoing damply through the snow,

and we both went very still.

"Welcome to the final Trial." Faolan's voice rang out around the clearing. "So far, our champions have displayed their skills of cunning in the first Trial." His blue eyes slid to me, the corners of his lips curling up. "In the second Trial, they displayed their gifts of magic." His eyes flicked from me to Thorne, then to Neve. "In this final Trial, we will test their skills in battle."

The soft moleskin of my glove pressed against my palm as Thorne grasped my hand all the tighter.

Faolan's lips twitched. "Now, you were all invited to bring a weapon of your choice…"

My other hand went instinctively to the knife at my belt. It wasn't as impressive a weapon as the broadsword strapped to Thorne's back or the twin blades Neve clutched in either hand, but with my father's schooling, it was at least a weapon I knew how to use.

And, of course, I still had my enchanting…if I decided to use it.

Guilt churned through me again. I already knew what was coming...

"What I didn't tell you," Faolan continued, his eyes narrowed, "is that your choice of weapon is *all* you'll have to defend yourself with in this Trial."

Thorne let go of my hand, taking a swift step forward. "What do y__"

With a soft clank of metal that cut off Thorne's words, Faolan produced the cauldron the champions had dropped their rings into when they'd first arrived at the Sky Court.

His smile turned vulpine. "For this final Trial, your bodies will be stripped of magic."

At those words, gasps swelled from the fae above us and a cold wind blasted around the clearing. The rings in the cauldron began to rattle. A high-pitched whine filled the air, an invisible force whipping the falling snow sideways.

A *change* came over Thorne and Neve.

The color leached from their faces, the permanent radiance that hung around their bodies fading to a dull, human shade. And to my surprise, it affected Faolan, too, his brighter glow fading before disappearing completely.

I caught my breath as the freezing air in the clearing turned lighter, the heavy, metallic sting of magic seeping out of it.

I wiggled my fingers, gazing down at my own unchanged body. I still had the same itch to reach down to the plants slumbering beneath the deep snow, could hear the whispers between the trees.

Faolan must have intended to take advantage of this loophole all along. My magic used my Craft to draw from the land around me,

rather than my body. He'd only needed the bargains to get me to the final Trial because for once...I would be more powerful than the fae.

Beside me, Thorne staggered back. Neve bent over double, retching, and even Faolan's smile wobbled.

"Stings a little, doesn't it?" the sky prince quipped, although his voice was light and breathy. He straightened up again slowly. "So, you have your weapons, if not the strength you would usually wield them with. Your task is simple. Slay the beast. And whoever strikes the killing blow becomes the Alder Heir to all of Faerie."

Slay the beast. What beast?

Faolan shot into the sky. I noted this with interest. He couldn't use his magic, but the skill with which he flew, the power with which he'd launched himself into the air, had stayed the same.

My eyes snapped back to Thorne and Neve. They had both already drawn their weapons, slipped into a defensive stance as they looked between the trees. Dread rippled through me as I wondered what sort of fae beast was about to emerge into the clearing, but thank Folk Faolan wasn't expecting us to fight each other.

I fumbled for my knife, trying to keep my body from shivering as my gaze switched back to the other champions, an uncomfortable thought crossing my mind.

With his magic, Thorne would easily have won the Trials. But now… Neve had the build of a warrior. Everything in her posture, her dress, screamed it at me.

Of course, Thorne was built like a fae warrior too—not with the same powerful build as Morven, the Mountain Court heir, but the agile, sleek body of a predator.

I couldn't begin to guess whether either of them had trained without magic before. What impact that sudden loss of strength might do to them.

I slid my knife from its hilt, the blade gleaming in the soft snowlight, and shifted closer to Thorne, my gaze tracking his, peering into the shadowy depths between the trees. Through the frenzied snow, my human vision could barely make out the trunks, let alone what might be lurking between them.

But I knew the fae of the forest. Had met them in the Folkwood. And I had no doubt that whatever beast Faolan intended to come for us would be far, far worse.

"Any guesses?" I whispered to Thorne.

He gave a slight shake of his head, his jaw set.

My heart lurched again. What was he thinking right now? Did he realize that my enchanting magic had been unaffected?

My gaze swept the clearing again. Of the three of us here, I now held the most power. The guilt roiling in my stomach turned into a

little thrill as it occurred to me again.

I could win this.

Then a low rumble beneath our feet shook the earth.

Snow showered down from the trees, clumps of it landing with a wet thump as the ground rattled.

My limbs turned watery, my heart drumming in my chest. What size must this fae beast be to shake the very earth?

I stumbled closer to the center of the clearing, twisting around, trying to prepare myself for what would emerge from between the trees.

“Stay close.” Thorne’s voice came from behind me.

The earth shuddered again, followed by the sound of wood cracking and snapping.

Thorne’s gaze suddenly dropped, a panicked look stealing over his face.

“It’s not—”

A roar sounded beneath our feet, then the air swept from my lungs as the ground lurched beneath us with a rumble like thunder.

I flew across the clearing, away from Thorne, landing with a spray of snow. I inhaled freezing slush, the ground raking claws of ice down my front.

I gasped in a few short breaths and scrabbled to one side, where my knife had landed in the snow beside me, my wet gloves curling around the hilt.

When I twisted back, terror lanced through me.

The beast hadn't come from the trees at all.

A silver, scaled, snakelike creature had erupted from the snow beneath our feet, its pointed end unfurling like a blooming flower to reveal rows upon rows of sharp, pointed teeth.

Sweat broke out on my brow.

“An earthwyrm…” Thorne’s voice came from the other side of the clearing.

He and Neve were already back on their feet, clutching their blades.

“Faolan wants us to slay an *earthwyrm*…” The frost princess said in a tone of disbelief.

The creature slid back into the ground, the earth rumbling again. I hastily stumbled to my feet, my boots thumping down against the snow.

But I had no time to ask Thorne what, exactly, an earthwyrm was before the rumbling sounded again...directly beneath me this time.

How did it know—

“My footsteps!” I gasped out.

It must be like… Well, like an *earthworm,* sensing the patter of the

rain on the ground. Only in this case, it could sense the vibrations caused by our feet.

I ran—but too slowly.

I flew back into the air as the earthwyrm erupted from the ground again, jaws snapping, scales grating over the glittering white crust of snow. It thrust itself with such force, it half-propelled across the clearing before crashing down.

I landed with a hard, wet thump, then scrambled frantically through the drifts of snow, making for the trees.

The earthwyrm slowed the farther it traveled across the ground until it drew to a halt just a few feet away from me. Its jaws unfurled again, the hot stench of earth and rotten meat reaching me across the snow.

My breath came in fitful starts, adrenaline spiking hot through my body. My heart thundered in my chest as I stared into its gaping mouth. I froze.

Then the earthwyrm slid backward with a low rumbling sound, disappearing back into the earth, leaving a huge crater that the disturbed snow tumbled into.

I snapped my head to Thorne. “Don’t move!” I barked. “That’s how it knows where to strike.”

“You think, human?” Neve sneered.

“You’re right, Aster,” Thorne said more encouragingly. “That’s exactly how an earthwyrm hunts.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. Neve and Thorne had both known what this creature was. Of course they would know how it hunted.

I glanced around to where my knife had been flung a few feet away and, very slowly, crawled across the snow toward it. My clothes grew heavier as freezing water seeped into them, but a plan was already forming in my mind.

“We can bait it,” I called over to the others, even as my words sent a terrified thrill through me. “I can draw it out so you know where it’s going to strike—”

“Absolutely not,” Thorne snapped.

Neve snickered. “Perhaps the human has a use after all… Personally, I can think of no better end to Faolan’s experiment than using his human as live bait—”

Her words were cut off by Thorne crashing around in the snow, stamping his boots down as hard as he could.

“Don’t!” I cried, but it was too late.

Already, the quaking vibrations beneath our feet told us that the earthwyrm was on the move again.

“Thorne,” I bleated in panic. “Without your magic…”

He swung his sword a few times, the blade slicing through the

falling snow, before dropping into an aggressive stance. “There are other ways of fighting, petal.”

The rumbling grew deafening.

At the last moment, Thorne sprung upward, just as the earthwyrm came barreling out of the snow, teeth gnashing. He brandished his sword, drawing it in a smooth curve, slicing it across the beast.

A blow that should have taken its head clean off.

Except…

The blade rebounded off the earthwyrm’s scales with a screech, shaking Thorne’s whole arm.

“Hollow hills!” snapped Neve. “Your human mate at least can claim ignorance, but you ought to know better.”

As the earthwyrm’s movement slowed with the friction of the snow, Neve hurtled toward Thorne, spinning her twin blades in a complex motion—trying to shave off the wyrm’s impenetrable scales, I realized.

But, just like Thorne’s, her blades bounced back off its body.

I swallowed, glancing down at the tiny knife I held in my hands. If Thorne’s and Neve’s greater blades couldn’t inflict any damage… My knife would be useless.

I sheathed it at my belt.

The wyrm began to sink back down into the earth, gnashing its teeth and flailing its body wildly. It swung toward me with a roar.

I tried to move back out of its reach, but its scaled body crashed into me, knocking me from my feet. The breath left my lungs as I collided with Neve, knocking both of us down onto the snow with a wet thump.

My heart beat faster as the wyrm’s silver snout disappeared back underground.

“Get off me!” Neve screamed, color rising on her cheeks. Her pointed chin jerked up, and she looked up to where the other fae were gathered. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes as I caught my breath, pressing myself back upright on trembling limbs.

We’d narrowly avoided being eaten by an earthwyrm and all Neve was worried about was what the other fae would think after she’d been knocked down by a human.

“Come on,” I said, fixing her with a firm stare and extending my hand. “No grievance is worth us both dying here for.”

Her expression froze. “My *grievance* regarding my mate’s death is something a human couldn’t possibly understand.”

I remained reaching down for her, splaying my fingers. “Kage—”

“Don’t you dare say his name!”

She swung her blade, slicing it across my stomach.

I stumbled back, the breath knocked from me, my hands flying to

the frayed material across my middle, my overcoat splitting open.

I gasped, pain blossoming through me at the impact…yet there was no blood.

Why aren't I bleeding?

The shock numbed my body, my thoughts. I pulled my torn overcoat open, expecting to see a slice across my midriff…but there was only the gleam of bronze metal.

Vanna's armor.

I dropped my hands, staring back at Neve.

The fae's face contorted with hatred.

"Aster!" Thorne's concerned voice echoed across the clearing, carried on the snow.

I spun, then twisted back as the earth quaked beneath us once again.

Neve's eyes widened, then she scrambled back—but not quickly enough.

The wyrm erupted from the earth directly beneath her, mouth wide.

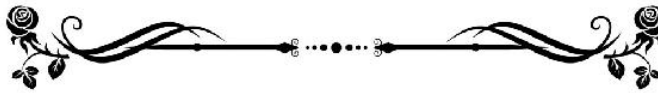
Its jaws snapped around her.

Bile stung the back of my throat as hot, dark blood sprayed across the snow. The earthwyrm had no way of controlling its movements once it came above the surface, so in spite of having made its kill, it still slid forward.

As it retreated, it left a smear of red blood across the clearing, Neve's limbs dangling like a puppet from its jaws.

I shrank back, dizziness washing over me, my thoughts jumbled as the wyrm disappeared into the earth, taking Neve with it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



"ASTER, *move*!" Thorne yelled, but my legs locked as I stared down at the hole the earthwyrm had just descended back into, the streak of Neve's blood vivid against the disrupted snow.

"Aster!" Thorne cried again, sounding closer.

He was right next to me, gripping my arm.

"It…took Neve..." was all I managed, my voice sounding distant even to my own ears.

It had all happened so quickly.

She hadn't even screamed.

Thorne tugged at my hand. "Stay at the edge of the clearing—see if you can climb one of the trees."

I dragged my gaze up to meet his bright, hazel eyes. A sheen of sweat coated his brow.

I shook my head, trying to regain control of my muddled thoughts. "I'm not leaving you to fight alone." I glanced down at the sword in his other hand. "Blades can't penetrate its scales."

"Then I'll find another way,"

"*We'll* find another way."

"No, Aster. It'll kill you."

"It'll kill *you*," I countered. "It already got Neve. And you don't have your fae healing powers anymore."

The ground tremored, slanting beneath our feet. I bent my knees slightly, throwing my hands out to steady myself. The wyrm was on the move again.

What had it done with Neve? Surely it hadn't eaten her in so short a time?

I fixed Thorne with a firm stare. "What do you know about wyrms?"

There had to be a way of killing it—Faolan wouldn't have entered me into an impossible Trial.

"Not much. They're related to dragons…" His breath clouded in the frigid air. "Luckily, they don't have wings or fire. Just rows and rows of those irondamned teeth."

I winced. *Luckily.*

“But they’re still magical creatures, and the scales are impenetrable…” He dropped his gaze to his sword.

“So we can’t use our blades, and it might eat us,” I said shakily, a laugh bubbling in my throat.

The ground lurched again, so hard that we both stumbled backward, gripping each other for support.

The moment we righted ourselves, my stomach dropped. The wyrm would have felt our shifting feet as we regained balance.

It knew where we were.

The ground shuddered, the snow rippling around us.

My mouth dried. “We have to move. *Now*.”

Thorne pushed me toward the edge of the clearing, and even without his magic, he was strong enough that I staggered back several steps.

“Aster, run, *hide*. Please.”

“No, Thorne.” My voice was pained. “We stay together, remember?”

I took a few steps toward the trees, stretching out a hand. “Come with me. We’ll climb a tree and come up with a plan toge—”

The earthwyrm erupted from the ground between us, a blur of silver scales. Snow and dirt sprayed into my face, the wyrm so close I could almost taste the tang of blood coating its teeth.

“Thorne!” I screamed, but he was nowhere to be seen.

I caught myself before I fell, using the momentum to stagger around the wyrm’s thick, writhing body, hoping Thorne had just been knocked out of sight.

“Aster—*run*!”

I looked up as Thorne’s strained voice came from above me.

From the jaws of the wyrm.

Ice shot through my veins. The wyrm had risen high out of the earth and wavered above me like a tree in a storm. Eddies of snow whirled around it, but I could still see Thorne caught up in its jaws, his legs and arms splayed wide like a star.

His trembling limbs held the creature’s mouth locked open, the only thing keeping the razor-sharp rows of teeth from clamping down and splitting him in two.

Horror seared a line through my middle, as if Neve’s blow had struck true.

Without his magical strength, Thorne couldn’t hold the teeth back for much longer.

The wyrm roared and writhed, spittle flying out around Thorne, steaming where it splattered on the snow.

I have to do something.

My body jolted into movement, boots crunching as I flew across

the snow, running toward the trees at the edge of the clearing.

But not to climb or hide. I called on the magic of the earth around me, my entire body heating as the urge to enchant rose to the surface of my skin in a rush. As I assessed the pine trees ahead of me, my whole being slipped into that flow state of Craft, dampening the adrenaline spiking through my limbs, narrowing my focus to the problem at hand.

Save Thorne. Stop the wyrm.

I slowed as I reached trees, already unsheathing my knife from my belt. I panted, not pausing to catch my breath.

There was no time for careful, considered Craft.

I worked on impulse, jumping up to catch hold of a slender branch and sending a shower of freezing slush raining down on me. I pulled with all my might, trying to snap it, then, when the thin wood just bent, began sawing frantically with my knife.

The sharp, green needles dug into my skin, the air filling with the scent of bleeding sap and fragrant leaves.

I cut a glance back toward the wyrm. It had risen even higher out of the hole, thrashing wildly with Thorne still in its mouth, trying to dislodge him from its jaws.

Thorne let out a roar that rattled through my bones.

A sob tangled in my throat at the sound. It wasn't a rallying war cry. This was him drawing on the last of his strength to stop the fangs from snapping closed.

The knife sawed halfway through the wood, then I jumped and pulled, the branch tearing loose in my hand.

As I turned on my heel and sped back toward the wyrm, I ripped off my gloves, my fingertips heating as I clutched the rough bark, feeling out the connection to the tree.

I sensed its ancient life in my hands, its strong, thick trunk, its snow-laced boughs. The roots burrowing deep into the earth beneath my feet.

The wyrm began to retract into its hole, Thorne still struggling in its mouth. If it disappeared underground with him…I'd never get him back alive.

The ground trembled beneath my boots, groaning slightly as my magic summoned the network of roots beneath the snow.

The wyrm stilled, twisting to look toward me.

Panic and fear and anger surged through my body.

I bent the branch around, crossing the ends over each other to form a loop. Using the most basic Craft I could think of to channel the magic, willing the roots to rouse themselves and…

Attack.

A crackling sound ricocheted throughout the clearing as roots

ripped free, whipping through the air.

Others rose from deep beneath the ground, poking through the crust of snow like reaching fingers. They knotted together, braiding into thick ropes as they slithered along the ground, shooting toward the wyrm.

They coiled around its body like a giant, squeezing fist. Deep within the wyrm's tunnel, where the rest of its body was hidden from view, more roots did the same, exploding from the earth and wrapping firmly around it.

Energy seeped out of me. I slowed my run to a stride, each breath burning my lungs as prickles of light danced across my vision, glittering like pixie dust.

I had almost nothing left to draw on for this enchantment. Stirring this ancient root system, holding and gripping the wyrm… It was draining me as surely as if I were fighting it with my bare hands.

I pulled the branch loop tighter, twisting it.

The roots twined around the wyrm in response, closing like a vise.

The creature let out a screech, and Thorne leaped from its mouth, rolling in the snow toward me. He pressed himself up on trembling arms, his gaze shooting toward me.

"*Aster…*"

Was he going to say something about me using my enchantment in front of the gathered fae?

Stars danced across my vision again.

I hadn't had a choice. It had been the only way to save him…

And now it could be my chance to win.

The thought nudged at me as the wyrm writhed and shrieked, trying to retract back into its hole. I coiled the branch even tighter, binding the roots to hold it in place.

A bead of sweat tickled my temple, my breath coming in hot pants.

I couldn't hold it much longer. My knees were watery, my chest tight.

I have to decide.

Thorne was back on his feet, his sharp eyes searching the snow. "Hold it still, Aster. I'll find my sword. I'm going to try to pierce its mouth."

"*What*?" The word escaped in a hiss. Thorne was planning to clamber back into the serrated jaws? I gritted my teeth. "Thorne, no. It's too dangerous."

But the next second, Thorne was running, bloody footprints following him in the snow. The teeth must have cut him badly.

He swept down to pick up his sword without breaking his stride, then doubled back toward the wyrm, rotating his wrist and whirling the blade in a smooth, practiced manner.

The creature still squirmed in the hold of my roots, letting out bone-scraping shrieks.

I looked between the fae prince and the earthwyrm, then down at the branch in my hand. The humans who'd been ensorcelled into fighting in Neve's twisted games flashed before my eyes.

My heart stuttered.

Thorne leaped for the wyrm, his sword drawn back, readying it for an upward stab.

"I'm sorry..." I whispered.

My arms tightened on the branch, the roots following my command.

They constricted until the wyrm gave a sickening crunch, the branch splitting with a sinewy crack at the same moment.

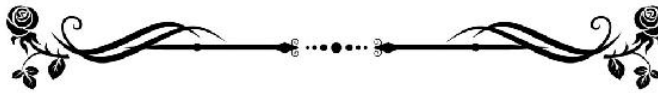
Lightness rushed into my head, a swell of nausea rising and cresting through me.

The wyrm stopped struggling. Dead.

The Trial was over.

And I had dealt the killing blow.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



I STARED at the prone body of the earthwyrm, crushed beneath the force of my enchantment. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I hardly dared believe it.

I had done this. The fae hadn't been able to kill it...but I, the first ever human champion in the Alder Trials, had slain the beast. My knees trembled, my whole body drained.

Horns blared out above us, resounding through the clearing before some of the fae spectators from the canopy of trees flew down to greet us, wings fluttering like a tinkling of bells.

The dim roar of cheers—from the Sky Court, no doubt—rose around us, accompanied by low, questioning murmurs.

My gaze snapped back to Thorne. The steps that separated us could have been a vast chasm. I'd expected him to be angry, to see those usual curls of shadow rising from his fists, his shoulders. But instead, it was pure shock stamped across his face, hurt written into his hazel eyes. Without his fae radiance, he'd never looked more human. I took a few labored steps toward him. I needed to explain.

But a light body dropped down beside me, long, hard fingers closing over my shoulder.

Faolan's voice echoed through the clearing. "The Sky Court champion has emerged victorious!" He couldn't keep the glee from his voice, his usual opaque manner replaced by a glitter of delight in his eyes, a smirk cutting across his face. "Aster Wilden slayed the beast. Therefore, she is the winning champion of the Alder Trials!"

The horns grew louder, a drumming joining them, and the swirl of sound around me became deafening. Other fae bodies landed in the snow, shadowing in, fluttering down on pretty wings, or else simply landing with a hard thump as they leaped directly down from the trees.

My gaze swept over the assembled Folk. Already, I could hear a few snatched words about magic. How it could be possible that I had used it. How Faolan must have cheated.

But Faolan's voice, carried on the wind, was louder than all of them. "I invite all of you back to the palace for celebrations in the

ballroom. The finest Sky Court hospitality awaits you on this glorious day. There will be no end to the delicacies and wine available to you."

His fingers dug harder into my shoulder before his other hand fastened around my waist. "But first, I require a few words alone with my champion…"

"Thorne—"

The word escaped my lips a beat before Faolan launched us both skyward into the thick flurry of snow.

My body felt like a lead weight, heavy with exhaustion. I reached one arm back down toward the earth, as though I could grab Thorne's hand, take him with us.

Surely once his magic returned to him, he would follow us back to the palace. He'd be angry, but I could explain.

"When does the magic return?" I asked Faolan weakly.

"It's seeping back into all of us already. I can feel it running through my veins...but it might take Thorne a moment to realize that's what's happening," he said cannily. "I've no doubt he's recovering from a great shock right now…"

The cold wind whipped soft flakes against my cheeks.

My limbs ached, the enchantment taking its toll on my body. But my mind felt alert. I drew in a breath. "What—"

"Aster," Faolan interrupted, "I do not wish to speak of Thorne right now. And nor should you. You've just proven beyond doubt what humans are capable of. *You,* a merchant's daughter, a nobody, beat not only Court Fae, but the heirs to all the other Courts."

The wind whistled past as he flew us higher. A golden glow returned to his skin, and he put on an extra burst of speed as his magic returned to him.

"The Sky Court ought to thank you, Aster."

I swallowed. Did Faolan realize the real reason I'd killed the beast? That I wanted to win for *myself*? I needed to think fast—explain why I'd done it.

"It-it would have killed Thorne," I stumbled out. "I had to do it."

That was true, in part. It was the reason I'd reached for my enchantment the moment the wyrm had snatched Thorne up in its jaws.

But dealing the killing blow... That had been a choice.

As we entered the clouds, my teeth began chattering, and I closed my eyes against the rush of freezing ice and snow. Moments later, we emerged above the cloudline again, and the bright light of the sun was blinding.

"It probably would have done," Faolan mused. "Still, we'll never know now, will we?" The slightest smile curled his lips.

My heart raced. "Was it possible to kill the wyrm without magic?"

I demanded. “Did Thorne or Neve ever stand a chance?”

Faolan ignored me, and his silence answered my question. Of course, he had never intended for anybody but me to win.

Whether I’d wanted to or not...I'd have been forced to use an enchantment eventually.

Knowing that I’d been manipulated by Faolan didn’t lessen the feelings of guilt that I’d betrayed Thorne. But neither fae prince knew I had my own reasons for winning...

A shadow fell across us as we neared the sky palace, its white towers blocking out the sun. I steeled my nerves, resolve hardening in my chest about what I had to do next.

I had to convince Faolan I wanted no part in the celebrations.

Then I had to find the Alder King, and kill him.

I clung tighter to Faolan as we swerved around a turret before heading lower, in through a narrow window. We landed in a small, simple room, and I blinked a few times, my eyes having to readjust after the dazzling sunlight.

“This isn’t the ballroom,” I said stupidly.

Faolan set me very gently down on the floor before sweeping his hands down the front of his embroidered waistcoat.

“No, Aster,” he agreed. “It isn’t.”

My seizing muscles barked in protest as I forced my legs to move back to the balcony we’d landed on, stopping a few steps away from the edge. The sounds of celebrations were still just audible outside, the horns and drums ringing in the air.

“Our bargains are over, then.” My heart thumped in my chest as I turned back to Faolan.

“Yes, Aster,” he conceded. “Your debt is settled.”

My shoulders sagged as I blew out a long sigh. For the first time since I’d woken at the Sky Court, I was no longer indebted to Faolan. And not only had I survived the Trials and earned my freedom, I’d actually *won*.

Suddenly, I was too hot in my layers. I began unbuttoning my heavy overcoat with stiff, trembling fingers. My whole body ached, the toll of the enchantment sapping at my remaining energy. I needed to lie down and rest, but no doubt Faolan had other ideas.

“I suppose you want me to change before the celebrations,” I mumbled, cursing myself as my clumsy fingers slipped over hard buttons.

There was a long silence before Faolan took a few sharp steps forward. His hands slipped to the front of my torn coat, bending down and slowly unbuttoning it from the bottom with fingers nimbler than my own. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. “Actually, Aster, I don't think there'll be any need for you to change.”

My head snapped up, my hands slowing over the front of my coat. “You’ve insisted I attend every one of these things in Sky Court colors,” I said in a crisp voice. “Showing off the pawn in your latest game. Even outside of the Trials, you insisted I met the other members of the Sky Court, joined you for drinks. You were furious when—”

“The thing is, Aster,” Faolan interrupted, shaking his head sadly. “I rather think that other Court Fae might be afraid to have you in their midst now.”

A creeping, prickling sensation ran down the back of my neck.

“What do you mean?” The words stuck in my throat.

Faolan heaved a sigh, still focused on the buttons of my coat. “Well, you've just shown all of the Courts what humans are capable of. What a human enchanter might do when pitted against the fae…”

The prickling feeling turned to ice, flooding my veins.

“But I had no choice,” I said. “I had to—”

“Of course you did,” Faolan said calmly. “No matter what some of the other Courts might try to argue, everything was done within the terms set by the competition. I made sure of it.”

His hands skimmed up to my shoulders, sliding the coat off my back. Folding it neatly, he hung it over the edge of the balcony.

“You were so frustrating in the Trials, refusing to use your enchanting. You could have used the forest plants in the first Trial, and in the second, if you’d have looked under the water, there were plenty of plants you could have used there.” He reached out to tuck one of my curls behind my shoulder. “But I suppose you came through in the end.”

I flinched away from him, and his hand slowed.

His ice-blue eyes fixed on mine. “You won the Alder Trials on behalf of the Sky Court, and better. You showed everyone the dangerous secret the Forest Court has been keeping from them all this time. That humans may use magic, and that when they do, the consequences for the fae could be disastrous.”

I took a few frantic steps back, but Faolan’s hand fastened around my wrist, yanking me forward. He led me over to the wall at the far side of the room, and my eyes slid to a feather carved into the stone.

The servants’ quarters.

“Where are you taking—”

We slipped out of the light, airy room and into the dark of the passageways, heading down the narrow staircases that twisted into the underbelly of the Court.

My heart began rattling in my chest.

I had tricked Faolan, not the other way around.

Hadn’t I?

“I fulfilled our bargains,” I said. “You have to let me go.”

A titter sounded from ahead of me. “Did I ever say that I would?”

I tried to halt but, pulled forward by Faolan’s insistent hand, stumbled down the next few steps. My body was too weak after casting my enchantment, and Faolan’s fae strength had fully returned.

“Our bargains are over,” I repeated impotently.

“They are, Aster,” Faolan said with exaggerated patience. “But I'm unwilling to let you go just yet.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Why?”

Faolan tutted, suddenly turning through another slim archway that led into a huge, dark room. I wrinkled my nose at the stench of sweat and urine.

More humans worked here in the same unsanitary conditions I'd seen on my earlier explorations with Mosswhistle. And lining the back wall of the room…

I tried to stop again, but Faolan simply tugged me forward.

Lining the room, rows of cells were stacked on top of one another, like bookcases...containing human prisoners.

Horror spiked through me as Faolan gestured with his spare hand to the cells. “We keep those who show signs of shaking off their ensorcellment in here,” he said in a clipped voice.

I drew in a shaking breath. “Y-you can’t keep me here.” I stuttered. “Thorne—he'll come for me. He'll tear this palace apart until he finds where you’ve taken me.”

Faolan just jerked me forward again, steering me toward a cell at ground level. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a long, slender key.

“I hope Thorne will think very carefully before acting against the new Alder King.” Unlocking the cell, he wrenched the door open with a shriek of metal.

Something hard banged against my side as he deposited me into the cell, just tall enough for me to stand up in, then the barred door shut behind me with a clank. I flinched back as it slammed into my shoulder, then shuffled forward, wrapping my fingers around the bars.

I glared at Faolan. “If you think Thorne won’t come to find me just because you're the Alder Heir—”

“Well, there is that.” Faolan smirked, turning the key in the lock. “And then there’s the fact that I don’t think he’ll be interested in saving you once he learns what I have to tell him.”

A knot formed in my chest.

The sky prince ran his hands lightly down the bars. “You saw how shocked he was when you killed the earthwyrm. When you took this competition from him. Imagine how he’ll feel when I tell him you were working with me this whole time. That every touch, every kiss, every word you exchanged with him at the Sky Court was all to fool

him into helping you reach this final Trial."

The knot in my chest grew more tangled. "You can't lie," I protested. "You can't tell him that."

Faolan's smile hardened. "I thought you of all people would have learned by now that I'm a master of twisting my words—and you've given me so much to work with. I can tell Thorne you kept secrets from him—that you knew about the no-magic rule of the third Trial and didn't warn him. I can tell him that you betrayed him and won the competition for me, because it's the truth. And with Thorne so angry to begin with…"

"He won't—"

"Believe me?" Faolan laughed darkly. "I shouldn't think he'll have much trouble believing that you deceived him. And I'll do my best to convince him you've been in league with me this whole time."

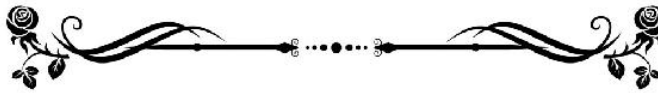
My chin trembled. I *had* betrayed Thorne. I had lied to him. And now Faolan could say those words, spin the truth to make it seem even worse.

The sky prince leaned closer to the bars. "Even if he does protest…I'm confident that I'll have the other Courts' support in my first decree as Alder King—eliminating *every* enchanter—since you've done such a wonderful job of demonstrating the threat such magic poses to the fae…"

I sank to my knees, my legs finally giving out.

Shooting me one final smirk, Faolan turned and stalked back out of the stinking, freezing servants' quarters, leaving me alone in my dark cell.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



I GRIPPED THE BARS TIGHTLY. Servants drifted around the basement quarters, carrying platters of food, baskets of linens, and trays of glittering silverware.

I'd long since stopped calling out to them, trying to get them to open the door. Ensorcelled, they were all deaf to my pleading. For days, I'd begged at the bars, and now my voice was hoarse. A servant had given me a gray tunic on the first morning, and the only time they'd come close since then was to slide a dismal meal of half-rotten vegetables through the slot at the base of the door once a day.

No natural light reached me here, but the regular food suggested it had been three days since Faolan had first locked me in this cell. That would mean today was the coronation. And the sudden flurry of servants' activity seemed to confirm it.

I was out of time. I'd never get to the Alder King now.

I let my hands slip from the bars and leaned back against the slimy wall, slowly sinking down onto the floor, my bones heavy. A headache surfaced, my whole skull throbbing.

Despite my wretched surroundings, I'd slept soundly for hours that first night, wiped out from my enchanting. But ever since I'd woken, I hadn't been able to sleep again, hunger and worry gnawing at my stomach and darkness shadowing every thought.

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes. I had been so naive. Thinking that if I won the final Trial, I'd be able to just waltz back into the Sky Court and kill the Alder King.

My throat thickened. Just as Faolan had taunted, I'd seen neither hide nor hair of Thorne, nor Vanna, nor Aurora since I'd been imprisoned. Not even Mosswhistle had tried to find me.

Eyes glazing with tears, I stared across the tiny cell to the filthy bucket in the corner. The whole cell stank like a compost heap.

I'd stolen Thorne's chance of being Alder King to make a bid for the crown instead.

But all I'd achieved was handing the position to Faolan—a fae who hated humans and who planned to wipe out enchanters. Once crowned, he would hold absolute power for the next two and a half

centuries. All humans would suffer for my actions.

A tear rolled down my cheek as I pulled my knees closer to my chin, the drab, gray fabric rough against my skin. I was surprised I could even cry, my tongue so dry it stuck to the roof of my mouth.

A soft shuffling sound jerked me from my wallowing, and my body tensed, ready to chase away the rats that squeezed between the bars.

Two shadowed figures suddenly loomed up outside. My heart lurched, fear tangled with hope, worrying Faolan had returned to make an example of me and wishing it might be Thorne, come to find me.

“Aster?” The rich, human voice that carried into my cell had me staggering to my feet.

“Bethel?” I whispered back, my voice cracking.

The lock clicked, and the door swung open, the two girls standing silhouetted.

“Call me Beth,” the redhead said with a grim smile.

“Are you all right?” Mariyad asked as they slipped inside, leaving the door ajar behind them.

“I’m much better now that you’re here…” I hugged the girls tightly, tears burning my eyes. “Thank Folk you came.” As I pulled away, I studied them through teary eyes.

Gone were the haunted faces, the hollow cheeks, and vacant stares. Their eyes were bright, hair brushed and braided neatly, expressions fierce.

“You freed us,” Mariyad said with a soft smile. “It’s only fair we repay you.”

“Besides,” Bethel added, tapping the key against her palm. “We’ve got a grievance to settle with the Sky Court.”

“There was no debt to repay,” I whispered. “But how did you know I was here? And how did you get the key? Has the coronation happened yet?”

Mariyad lit a lantern and set it on the floor, creating a puddle of light around us while Bethel fished around in her robes and produced a chunk of fresh bread.

“You need to eat,” she said firmly, giving the tray of old vegetables on the floor a swift kick with one foot.

I hesitated, desperate to know more, but the yeasty scent pressed itself into my nose, and my stomach growled. I half-snatched the bread from her hands, tearing off a chunk and shoving it into my mouth.

I squeezed my eyes together, chewing and swallowing. With each bite of food, I could feel energy seeping back into me at last.

When I opened them again, Mariyad watched me keenly. “Aurora told us what happened at the Trial.” Her voice turned slightly

breathless. “Did you really win it with magic?”

I nodded, my mouth too full with another hunk of bread to speak.

The girls shared a high-browed look.

“The princess told us Faolan had locked you in here,” Mariyad continued, her brow wrinkling. “She also let slip where the keys were kept to the cells, like she wanted us to know. Mosswhistle stole it for us.”

So Mosswhistle *was* helping them.

Warmth blossomed in my chest, relief flooding through me. I swallowed the last mouthful of bread, the food settling the insistent, scraping hunger in my belly and sharpening my thoughts.

Bethel handed me a cup of water. “The coronation is happening now—well, in the next hour or so. We think. All of the fae are heading to a courtyard at the top of the palace.”

I gulped down the water greedily as she spoke. It tasted sweet against the sourness coating my tongue.

“Plus we got caught on the way by one of the Sky Court fae.”

I coughed, choking mid-gulp.

“Well, not *caught*,” Mariyad clarified. “He didn’t know we weren’t ensorcelled. But he ordered us to fetch the coronation wine for the Alder King. We had no choice but to obey or give ourselves away.”

I drained the last of the water. “And?”

Bethel took the cup from me, then fished an apple from the pockets of her tunic. “We had to pretend to be ensorcelled.” Her face turned tighter, and I could see the pain it had caused her to pretend to be enslaved. She turned the fruit over in her hands before tossing it to me. “We delivered it to a chamber next to the courtyard before we came to find you.”

Relief made my body sag against the wall, and I took a huge bite out of the crisp apple.

I’m free, and there’s still time.

I just needed a new plan.

Scrabbling sounded outside the door, and I threw the girls a panicked glance.

“It’s all right,” Bethel said with a knowing smile. “It’s just…”

“Mosswhistle arrives!” the brownie announced in an overblown whisper as it sidled through the door, carrying a huge bundle in its trembling arms. “Brings Craft for Mistress.”

It unrolled the bundle in a deft movement, like it was whipping out a tablecloth. In the shadowy light, I could make out an assortment of gardening tools from the glasshouses. My book of notes, a medley of plants…and a small glass vial containing a pale-purple liquid.

The antidote.

I dropped to my knees and pulled the brownie into a hug. “Thank

you, Mosswhistle."

This could be just what I need. The inkling of a plan stirred in the depths of my mind.

Mosswhistle looked pleased, smoothing spindly hands over its bat-like ears.

I stood, rolling the vial between my fingers, and cleared my throat before addressing the girls. I couldn't quite meet their eyes. "And Thorne…?"

They exchanged a look.

"He's fine," Bethel said gently.

"But...he didn't help you?"

"No."

I inhaled, then nodded. *What was I expecting?* I'd betrayed him in the final Trial, and Faolan had told me that he would do everything in his power to make Thorne believe the worst about me.

I'd hoped he wouldn't believe Faolan...that he'd at least give me a chance to explain myself. Wasn't he worried that he hadn't seen me since the final Trial?

I squared my shoulders, pressing down the hurt and guilt. This wasn't about Thorne. This was about *me*, about all humans, and my last chance to fix everything.

But how?

I pursed my lips. "This coronation wine… You said it was for the Alder King?"

Bethel turned to show a bruise blossoming on her pale cheekbone. "One of the fae hit me when I fumbled with the carafe. He said it was for the Alder King and that I should be more careful."

Anger simmered in my stomach at her treatment.

"And I had to fetch a golden goblet, just one," Mariyad chimed in. "It was the finest thing I've ever seen, Aster. Fit for a king."

I gripped the vial tightly, running through every possibility in my mind. There was a huge risk, of course there was, but…

"Can you remember where this chamber was? Could you give me directions from here?"

The girls nodded in tandem.

Silver bells, this could actually work.

"We could show you," Bethel added.

I shook my head, looking down at Mosswhistle. "No, I need you three here. I need you to fetch the rest of the antidote and use it to free the servants while everyone is distracted by the coronation."

Then at least even if my plan didn't work, the humans here would be free.

"The cauldron is in my bathing chambers. You'll need to collect it and bring it down here," I instructed, slipping back into my composed

greenwitch tone. “Mosswhistle will have to instruct everyone to drink, like before. And you’ll have to calm them and explain what’s going on. No more than two mouthfuls each, okay?”

The girls nodded. Their brows were lowered, but their eyes gleamed with a new purpose.

“How far is it to the nearest human settlement from here?”

“Maybe two days’ walk,” Mariyad said.

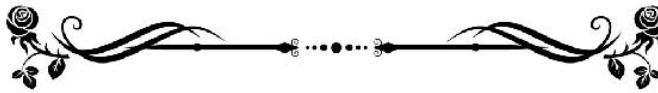
I nodded. “Head there...then round up all the humans who are willing to leave and take them south, across the border to the Forest Court.” I winced. “Even if my plan works, Faolan’s going to be pretty mad to discover all of his servants have disappeared…”

“And what is Mistress’s plan?” Mosswhistle looked up at me in concern, wringing its clawed hands together.

I lifted the antidote as if in a toast. The folkshade within it would cure the ensorcelled humans...but even a drop of my powerful decoction would be fatal to any fae who tasted it.

I smoothed down my gray servant’s robes, a humorless smile lifting my lips. “I’m going to kill the Alder King.”

Chapter Thirty



THE PAD of my bare feet on the marble floor was barely audible over the sounds of fae migrating toward the courtyard at the top of the Sky Court. Voices whispered and chittered, wings buzzing as the fae flew down from the open blue skies vaulting overhead, tapping talons and shoes echoing throughout the corridors.

So far, so good.

I'd raced up the servants' stairways, my calves burning, but it was only now I'd emerged into the airy corridors of the Sky Court proper that I had to change my movements. Slow them. My heart thundered against my ribcage, but I forced myself to move steadily, unhurried, like the other human servants. I placed one foot in front of the other, eyes downcast.

Adrenaline pumped through me. I wanted to run.

Any second, the wine for the king could be moved, and I'd have lost my chance to put things right.

But if I made a wrong move and caught the attention of the fae, I might not make it there at all.

I dug the empty tray I carried into my hip, the pressure steadying me. I forced a sluggishness into my limbs, breathing deeply.

The sounds of fae voices grew louder.

Nearly there…

I risked lifting my gaze from feet to faces. Up ahead, a crowd of fae had congregated outside the archway leading out into the vast courtyard, a sea of bodies filtering through. Based on the girls' directions, the door to the small chamber adjoining it had to be coming up on my right.

A hiss escaped my lips. Flying overhead, against the tide of bodies, was Larkrise—the Sky Court fae who had questioned me before the first Trial—and he seemed to be looking for something.

I instantly dropped my head again, a twinge of fear thrumming through me.

If he got close enough, he'd recognize me instantly despite the snarl of hair over my shoulder or the shapeless gray tunic.

My gaze slid sideways to where a group of human servants moved

as one, each carrying a platter of delicacies. I took a swift sidestep, joining them at the back, then leaned forward to the girl in front to slide a few of the morsels—tiny, sugar-spun birds—onto my empty platter. I arranged them quickly before holding it aloft, mirroring the other servants.

Larkrise passed above us, so low that the downdraft from his wings stirred my loose hair. I kept my head lowered, sweat prickling down my back. I didn't dare look up in case I found him hovering above me, keen blue eyes boring into me.

The servants ambled forward at their steady pace, unchallenged. After a few moments, I blew out a pent-up breath. I glanced over my shoulder. Larkrise had disappeared.

And not a moment too soon, as I spotted the arched, stone door to the chamber Mariyad and Bethel had described. As the others shuffled past it, I peeled off from the group, sliding through the door and into the room.

I continued to move with the same slow gait, in case there were any waiting fae inside, but the room was empty. My shoulders sagged.

Setting down the tray, I glanced around, butterflies churning in my stomach.

It was colder in here, and the stone columns in this room were rougher than the polished marble in other parts of the Court. Huge, vaulted, stained-glass windows lined one wall, the depiction of blue, cloud-fleeced skies turning the lances of sunlight filtering through cool-toned.

There.

On the far side of the room, on a pale stone plinth, sat another tray containing a glass carafe, a jewel-studded goblet, and several plain, long-stemmed glasses.

I crept across the room, the cold, stone floor biting into my bare feet, anticipation sparking inside me.

Stopping before the plinth, I glanced back to the door. Still closed.

I reached inside my thin, gray robes to where I'd stashed the small vial of potion and uncorked it with a soft pop, the brittle, bitter aroma of the antidote filling the air for a moment.

I prayed it would be undetectable when mixed with the rich, syrupy faerie wine on the tray. The wine was the deep color of blackberries, so it would at least mask the antidote's color, turned a dull purple by the folkshade.

Resting the vial on the lip of the carafe with a clink, I tipped in the purple potion, the chiming sound of glass on glass reminding me uncomfortably of fae laughter.

I exhaled as the last drop fell into the wine and tucked the empty vial back beneath my robes. That was more than enough to kill a fae. I

brushed my clammy palms down the rough material, then picked up the carafe and swilled the wine inside, the deep-red liquid leaving a tide mark like blood as it swirled.

A sharp swell of voices rushed into the room, then disappeared again as a door clicked closed.

I froze.

"Oh, Aster."

My stomach plummeted at the familiar, smooth voice.

"I hope you're not doing anything…ill-advised."

Setting down the carafe, I turned to face Faolan. He'd entered through a door I hadn't noticed, one that cut into the side of the stone that must lead directly into the courtyard, rather than the corridor.

I took a slow step backward.

The sky prince was dressed in the richest outfit I'd ever seen him in—cream pants, a frilly white shirt, and a puffed doublet the rich color of bluebells, stitched with gold sunbursts and encrusted with sapphires, pearls, and lapis lazuli. He wore a thick, velvet cloak to match, the white fur trim grazing the floor as he stepped toward me, tan boots shining.

He looked like a king.

I swallowed hard. How had he found me? Had Larkrise spotted me after all?

"Faolan." I tried to greet him lightly, but my voice shook.

His eyes glittered as his gaze shifted from me to the plinth behind. "Did you really think you could stop the coronation by tampering with the wine?"

"No, that's not what—" I shook my head. "I didn't—"

"There are no plants in this room." He gestured around the stark space. "I see no fae lover. Why else would you be in here?" He took a swift step closer to me, and a rush of dread flooded my body.

"Try it," I gambled, sidestepping away. "Try it—you'll see it's not poisoned."

Faolan simply laughed.

It had been worth a shot.

"I see you're dressed as one of the servants." Faolan reached out and pinched the gray material between his long fingers, lips turning down. "You know, you've always looked so much better in my colors…"

His blue eyes gleamed in the light from the stained-glass windows, his warm skin taking on a silvery hue.

"However…if you believe this is the station you truly belong to…we can make that happen." He stepped closer, strong hands shooting out to pin my arms at my sides. "No rowan beads, no Thorne to protect you this time," he crooned.

I tried to jerk away, suddenly realizing what he was hinting at. His grasp only tightened.

"No, Faolan." My voice rose a pitch. "Please. *Don't.*" I squirmed in his grip.

"There's an easy way to find out if you poisoned the wine…" He leaned closer, his breath hot on my face. I strained against his hold, but Faolan was fae, and far stronger.

His eyes blazed. "If you will dress as a servant…you should expect to be treated like one."

Horror lurched through my body, my breath coming in sharp, shallow pants.

He was about to ensorcel me.

"Despite your *Craft*," he sneered, "despite your enchanting ability… Your inexplicable allure..." His nostrils flared, although his voice remained composed. "You are still human, Aster. Which means you will never be the equal of any fae here."

I tried to break his gaze, jerking my head away from him. Faolan shifted his body, gripping me in a tight embrace with one arm, the other reaching up to hold my chin firmly. His nails dug into my skin as he dipped me backward, as if I were his partner in a courtly dance.

"We control you," he half-whispered against my neck. "And that is the way it should be."

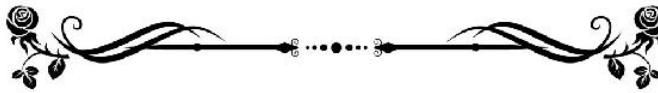
He brought his face close to mine.

"*Please*," I begged, arching my back away. "Don't do this—"

Faolan's pupils blew wide, his gaze darkening. "You are my creature, Aster Wilden."

His voice dropped to a low, hypnotic monotone, his faerie magic rushing through every fiber of me, coiling around my mind and my body like a thick fog. "And from this moment on, you will do only what I tell you to."

Chapter Thirty-One



A WARM FUZZINESS spread from the base of my skull. Speckles of sunlight danced across my vision, everything blurring and shifting into bright pulses of light. My body fell slack.

I blinked.

I am his creature. I do only what he says.

The words flowed through me like a soft breeze.

Warm arms released me, and I stood upright, staring straight ahead. Everything was a blur, but the sky prince's face was pin sharp, golden. As my breathing slowed, my chest rose and fell steadily.

"Let's start by pouring yourself a glass of the wine you *claim* not to have poisoned."

Pour a glass of wine.

The directive whispered through my mind, a hot wind stirring my limbs. As I slowly turned, it subsided.

A white plinth sharpened into view, a carafe of wine and slender glass. I reached toward it, fastening my fingers around the neck of the carafe, and poured.

The wine trickled into the glass.

"Enough."

Stop. That silky voice again, echoing in my mind.

I set the carafe down.

Fingers dug into my shoulders, a whisper against my ear as clear as a bell ringing. "Now drink it."

Drink the wine.

I reached for the glass, the thin stem steady between my fingers. I guided it toward my lips, then poured the liquid down my throat. It was warm and syrupy but tasted of nothing. I swallowed rhythmically, tilting my head until there was nothing left.

The glass was tugged from my hand.

Blue eyes filled my vision, hovering in a brilliant light.

I stared at them, unmoving.

Waiting.

Finally, the eyes blinked. "Interesting… No poison."

A rush of lightheadedness washed over me, pins and needles

prickling my arms and legs. My tongue felt thick in my mouth, the taste of faerie wine lingering in the back of my throat.

The sounds of the crowd outside the door returned as a low background hum.

Then the calm that had settled over me like a warm blanket was ripped away, and a rush of cold flooded my body.

Slowly, everything in the room came back into view, the ethereal light fading.

I kept very still.

Every heartbeat rolled like thunder in my chest, my pulse roaring in my ears as I tried to make sense of what was happening to me.

The antidote.

The folkshade antidote must have cured the ensorcellment *and* any effects the faerie wine had on me.

And Faolan had no idea how short-lived his ensorcellment of me was.

A giddy laugh built in my throat, but I stifled it. I was still a mouse pinned beneath claws.

Swallowing, I stared up at him, forcing a blankness to my expression. I tried to breathe deeply but silently to calm my heart.

Faolan couldn't learn I'd poisoned the wine with folkshade. He had to think I was still ensorcelled.

He stretched out a hand, curling a lock of my hair around his long finger. "It's certainly a novelty to have you so…pliable around me," he murmured.

A sick feeling built in my stomach, but I kept my face neutral.

He flashed a pearly-white grin. "I've thought about ensorcelling you many times. At the Cursed Court. When you woke here. But then Thorne gave you those rowan beads. Regardless, you were so easy to manipulate, I really had no need…until now."

Drawing back, he pressed both hands together as if in prayer, touching them to his lips. "Now though, Aster. It's time for the truth. Tell me—who helped you escape?"

I blinked, slowly. "No one," I replied after a beat, trying to keep my tone flat and languid, like Bethel and Mariyad had sounded. "I escaped myself by picking the lock."

Faolan frowned but accepted my answer. He lifted a sharp, golden eyebrow. "What are you doing in this room? Why were you hovering over the coronation wine?"

Thinking on my feet, I answered in the same emotionless drawl. "I was looking for Thorne…to explain. I thought he would be in the courtyard with all the other fae. I thought if I carried in the tray with the coronation wine, I would be able to get close to him."

My stomach hollowed out as I waited for Faolan to reply, my eyes

fixed distantly on the door. It was a constant effort to force my whole body to relax when my muscles were tense and sweat gathered between my shoulder blades.

My cover story wasn't perfect, but it was believable. And Faolan had no reason to question it when it came from my supposedly ensorcelled lips...

Moving into my line of sight, the sky prince scrubbed a hand over his smooth, pointed chin.

"Well…" he said finally. "That's not a bad plan. It's one I think we could still carry out, actually. *Together*." His lip curled into a smirk, then he took a step back, appraising me. "Of course, we don't want you looking like a servant…and there's no time to dress you properly."

He pursed his lips, then walked around me slowly, his boots scuffing the floor. After a few moments, he stopped in front of me again, unfastening the gold chain at the top of his ornate cloak.

"I'm loath to lose my coronation cloak, but I suppose it's necessary," he murmured as he wrapped it around me. The material thudded heavily over my shoulders in a waft of fresh air and sun-dried cotton, disguising my unwashed, ragged tunic. The fur itched my neck. He fastened it at the front and tugged it closed.

Faolan's sharp gaze dragged up to my face, then his hands were in my hair, combing through it and pulling the strands painfully into some sort of tight braid.

It hadn't been washed since before the final Trial, so how he was going to make it presentable was beyond me…

"That will have to do…" He dropped his gaze, scrutinizing my face. I willed everything to stay still, my eyes to stare right through him, to not even blink.

He trailed his long fingers up either side of my face, then pinched my cheeks. Beneath the cloak, I clenched my hands into fists as heat blossomed with the dull pain.

"There, now you look more alive. You're lucky your mortal beauty hasn't faded after a few days in a cell." Faolan gave me an indulgent smile, and I imagined slapping him, hard, across his perfect, glowing face.

"And for the finishing touch…"

He slid a beautiful, golden ring from his left hand. The tiny sun winked up at me as he pushed it onto my thumb. It was the same ring he'd given me at the opening ceremony of the Alder Trials, the ring I'd thrown into the cauldron.

"Now pick up the tray."

I obeyed, the motion stilted beneath the heavy cloak weighing down my body.

Faolan cleared his throat lightly. “You will enter by my side, and you will not leave it until I ask you to. You will believe you are loyal to me. You will believe you are working with me because you love me.” His tone was clipped, practical—a male used to giving instructions to human servants. “Thorne already believes that we always planned to use his protectiveness for you to our advantage in the Trials, and then to betray him in the final task. So that I might become king.”

Faolan glowed brighter as he rattled off his instructions, excitement lighting his features when he spoke those final words.

“And speaking of my becoming King of Faerie, that time is finally upon us…” He patted the sword buckled at his side.

I took a step closer to him, glasses clinking softly on the tray held in my clutches.

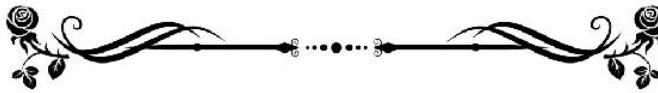
The aroma of the wine curled around me, steadying my nerves.

I still held a tray of poisoned wine. I would still deliver it to the Alder King. I just had to keep Faolan duped until the king had drunk.

No.

Until the king was dead.

Chapter Thirty-Two



I SQUINTED as I stepped out of the side room and into a vast courtyard, dazzlingly bright sunshine pooling onto the pale stone, warm beneath my still-bare feet. I drew in a slow breath, focusing all of my energy on keeping my hands from shaking and rattling the tray.

Faolan would expect me to be indifferent to everything, to carry the tray steadily and calmly in the way that any of the other ensorcelled humans in the Sky Court would have done.

The slightest tremble would tell him I had undone his magic.

His hand found the small of my back, nudging me forward. Side by side, we prowled through the crowd of Court Fae, his fur-trimmed cloak sweeping out behind me like a veil. I did my best to keep my eyes fixed vacantly ahead of me, resisting the temptation to turn and stare at the glittering, colorful fae whispering and drinking as they swirled around the courtyard, sunlight flashing off shining wings.

From the corner of my eye, I caught glimpses of gold and silver threads running through long braids, silk skirts, and swinging coattails. The fae fell quiet and parted before us, sharp, bright eyes fixing on me, creating a path through the crowd up to a dais at the far end of the courtyard.

A lump formed in my throat. Seated on a throne of twisted vines and weeds that sprang out of the cracks between the paving stones was the Alder King.

The fae I was here to kill.

Just as when I'd met him before the third Trial, my eyes were drawn to the bone crown on his head.

The king gave me that same instinctual feeling I'd experienced when I'd first met Thorne.

Run.

I swallowed, praying that Faolan didn't notice the bob of my throat.

Sweat slipped down my spine as I wondered whether I dared drop my gaze to the tray in my hands, to look away from the figures on the dais. Because I knew who else I would see if I looked too closely… I could already sense the prickle of Thorne's magic, so distinctive to me

now, even among the rich scent of the other fae magic swelling in the courtyard.

A group of chittering sprites suddenly fluttered down, landing on my shoulders, in my hair, weaving it with tiny, blue forget-me-nots. My steps almost faltered, but I forced myself not to respond, just to keep walking.

Faolan tutted, waving a hand through the air to disperse them, and it was an effort not to flinch away.

"Now, now," he sighed, raising his voice as we approached the dais. "Is that any way to treat the consort of the Alder Heir?"

Consort?

My insides turned as whispers flew thick and fast around the courtyard, every pair of fae eyes focusing in on the two of us as we approached the Alder King.

How dare he. How *dare* he suggest there was...*that* between us.

I knew it was to hurt Thorne. But surely, Thorne wouldn't think… He would never believe any such thing.

I swallowed tightly. And not just Thorne—what would the other Courts think? Faolan wanted them to fear human enchanters, to give them a reason to go back to the old ways of oppressing *all* humans and—as he put it—eliminating the enchanter threat. What did he hope to achieve by walking to his coronation with a human enchantress at his side?

Still, I had no choice but to continue walking blankly along beside Faolan, acting as though my blood weren't simmering in my veins, as though it weren't difficult to keep my steps steady, my breathing even. Fury and outrage burned through me, a fire sweeping through dry wood in a forest.

As we grew closer to Thorne, the prickle of his magic grew heavier, smokier, like the tension before a storm. We halted a few steps before the dais, Faolan's fingers wandering up my back.

"Difficult, isn't it?" he said, addressing his comment to Thorne. "To persuade the Little Folk to leave such a pretty thing alone, even when they know she belongs to another." His lip curled.

Thorne's face was like stone, but beside him, the Alder King let out a weary sigh.

"Really, Faolan. Must we go through these theatrics?" He waved an impatient hand through the air. "My son fell for the wide eyes and the pretty words of a human liar. We get it." A disdainful look passed over his face. "Someone so easily swayed does not deserve to be heir to the throne, irrespective of his performance in the Trials."

Although Thorne had remained impassive at Faolan's words, he flinched at his father's accusatory tone, and my heart broke for him.

Then the Alder King's stripping gaze fell to Faolan. "Of course, one

might question who is the more foolhardy. The male who fell for her the first time and was bitten by it…or the male who fails to learn from the first's mistake."

A titter ran around the assembled fae, and Faolan's face flushed with fury as the Alder King continued, "I'm sure she has persuaded you she now belongs to you, just as she once persuaded my errant son she was his."

Faolan's hand pressed against my back as he urged us forward up the steps to bring us level with the throne. He raised his voice before speaking again. "Aster is *mine*."

The words resounded around the courtyard, but the Alder King's lip just twitched up.

His gaze flicked back to me, running up and down my body, not missing the sliver of mushroom-colored servant's garb just visible between the ornate folds of Faolan's cloak, the way my knuckles had turned white where I clutched the tray.

A shockwave crashed through me as hazel eyes, so similar to Thorne's, pierced my own.

He saw me. He *really* saw me…

I willed myself to lower my eyes, to remain as vacant as possible...but it was impossible under the force of that unyielding, ancient power.

I loosed a light breath as the Alder King's gaze returned to Faolan, a lazy smile spreading over his face. "If you say so," he drawled.

"I do say so," Faolan snapped, his voice carried around the courtyard by the wind, "and thankfully, *Silvius*, you don't have too much longer to tell me otherwise."

He reached for the gleaming hilt of the ornate sword swinging from his hip, flashing it meaningfully toward the king. Then his hand shoved against the small of my back, making me stumble forward a step.

"Serve them some wine," he commanded, his voice crisp and cool.

It required every ounce of my training as a greenwitch, all of my old skills that had taught me to keep my emotions under tight control, to take those few steps forward.

"You will serve His Majesty first." Faolan's voice sounded from behind me.

The tightness in my chest eased a little as I turned toward the throne. This was what I'd hoped Faolan would ask of me. Balancing the tray carefully on one hand, I clutched the jeweled carafe in the other and poured out a thin stream of wine laced with folkshade.

Thank Folk Faolan had instructed me to serve the Alder King first. It would take only the smallest sip for any fae to die...

The liquid pooled into the glass, and I filled it almost to the rim

before offering it to the king. Once again, I couldn't help meeting his gaze. He appraised me, a knowing look flashing behind his eyes as he took the golden goblet, stripping away all my efforts at concealing my emotion. Almost imperceptibly, he lifted the glass back toward me.

I breathed in and out very slowly before turning away without acknowledging the movement.

"Now…the forest prince," Faolan instructed.

My stomach dropped.

I turned to Thorne, and for the briefest moment, my eyes met his, drinking in the color of light dappled on a forest floor.

They narrowed, and with the movement, what I felt…was not guilt, but fury. Thorne really believed I'd left him for Faolan. Yes, I'd kept secrets, and I'd betrayed him in the final Trial. But how could he believe that everything that had happened between us was a lie?

Was it just that fae prejudice against humans ran too deep, that it was apparently all too easy for him to believe that of me? Or did he really have so little self-worth that he believed I had never loved him, that our relationship had all been some grand act on my part?

I quickly dropped my gaze to the tray, once again shifting its weight as I balanced the cool metal on my left hand and poured the wine as slowly as I could.

The anger drained from me as I realized what this meant. My heart stuttered as the stream of liquid flowed out of the carafe. It would only have to touch Thorne's lips for the folkshade to take effect.

I placed the carafe back down. Could I really hand the poisoned wine to Thorne? But to do anything else would be to reveal that I was free of my ensorcellment and alert the whole room to the poison in the king's goblet…

Without acknowledging me, Thorne swept the glass from the tray.

I stifled a cry, but he didn't lift the glass to drink.

Holding in a sigh of relief, I returned to Faolan, who guided me to the far side of the throne. I turned to the sea of fae faces, a blur of glowing skin, extravagant costume, and the constant, heavy hum of magic.

"Champion of the Alder Trials…and now wine server." The Alder King's voice rang out, followed by a sweep of laughter around the courtyard. "Perhaps this girl is luckier than most humans…or perhaps not."

The insides of my cheeks ached, the muscles in my shoulders bunching with the effort it took to keep from looking back at the Alder King.

I shifted ever so slightly so I could see the throne.

"This is a break from tradition," the Alder King said softly. The chiming fae voices in the courtyard seemed to hush in a way they

never did for Faolan. “But then, I believe a precedent has been set by entering this girl into the Trials in the first place. So, before I invite all of you to toast, I offer *you*, Aster, my private thanks…”

My heart stilled as the Alder King stood, raising his glass in my direction, and took a sip.

I didn't dare move, not so much as a muscle. I hadn’t tested the poison. I didn't know how long it would take for the folkshade to work.

Although I continued to stare, unfocused, at the gleaming, golden tray in my hands, my attention shifted to Thorne. I could feel him as always. The weight of his magic, the scent of rosewood and smoke. He hadn’t raised his glass to join his father’s private toast to me.

The folkdamned poison *had* to work on the king before Thorne took a sip of the wine himself.

The Alder King raised a long-fingered hand to his throat and began to speak. “For two hundred and fifty years, the last quarter millennium, I have served my time as Alder King. I have ruled the Kingdom of Faerie in such a way that has brought a peace between us and our human neighbors, the likes of which had not been seen for many centuries.

“I know not all of you may have liked my methods...but all of you should be able to see for yourselves the effects of them.” He paused, his hand going back to his throat.

In spite of myself, my fingers curled more tightly around the tray.

I couldn’t stop picturing Thorne’s hand around his own cup…

The king’s voice caught before he continued. “With the power of being Alder King comes an acceptance of your fate. That your life will shine brightly, brilliantly, before the shadow at the end of it. A fair way to rule, given the length of our lives. A way that ensures we remain powerful, reactive. It is for the good of Faerie, and so I finish my rule gladly. I hope that all I have done—”

He broke off, and my stomach knotted as I risked a proper glance back at him. A faint flush had risen in his cheeks, and a glassiness had come over his eyes. But if he knew what I’d done, he showed no sign of it. He paused only for a moment before continuing.

“All that I have done in my time as Alder King has been for the good of Faerie. And now, as I prepare for my final act of service to my kingdom…”

His voice died at the end. There was a definite pinkness to his cheeks now, a sheen of sweat glistening over his skin. But still, he didn’t voice any concern, or ask for a glass of water, or even pause for any longer than a moment.

“I hope,” he said in a wavering voice, “that my successor will continue to strive for peace. That the Kingdom of Faerie will do—will

do—" He tugged at his collar. "Will do well under their rule," he concluded.

He'd gone very still. The fluidity and grace of his movements, that indescribable sense of ancient presence, had vanished.

My eyes were once again drawn to the crown of bone sitting on his head. Hissing whispers filled the air, a rush of mingled voices murmuring into my ears, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The blood in my veins pulsed heavier, slower.

Could anyone else hear the whispers? Or was it just me?

"Once again breaking with tradition," the king spoke again, his voice now light and breathy, "I ask you all to toast not to this year's heir, but to my legacy, for which I have given everything."

Beside me, Faolan let out a low growl, and I realized that the Alder King hadn't mentioned him once. Not by name, not even his Court. Almost as if...he didn't *expect* Faolan to become king.

A coldness stole through my veins as once again it crossed my mind that the Alder King had somehow intuited what I had done.

"So, all of you," he continued, "my last drink will be to the Kingdom of Faerie."

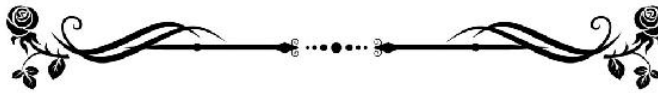
He raised his goblet, and around the room, every other fae did the same, chiming voices repeating the same words.

"To the Kingdom of Faerie."

My blood ran cold as I turned to Thorne.

And a scream tore from me before I could help it, blood pulsing in the back of my head as he lifted his glass.

Chapter Thirty-Three



THE TRAY FELL from my hands with a clatter, the carafe shattering against the paving stones as I lunged forward, my feet finding my way over the carpeted dais, the *thump, thump, thump* of my footsteps resounding in my ears as I raced to Thorne.

My hands smacked against his wrist, fumbling for the cup.

He didn't drop it, his long fingers curling more tightly around the glass, but the dark-red liquid sloshed over the side. I drew in a rattling lungful of air, my breathing too fast, too shallow.

“Don’t drink it,” I rasped, my mouth dry.

As I lowered my hand, his hazel eyes widened with shock, then realization. I held his gaze, silently pleading with him to understand why I’d had to poison his father.

The roaring in my ears subsided, my racing pulse evening out to a light flutter.

Before I could say anything more, a dull thud sounded beside us.

I tore my eyes from Thorne, turning back to face the throne.

The Alder King lay sprawled across the ground, fine purple lines lacing his cheeks, the slightest frown creasing his brow.

His elegant frame, the green robes around him, reminded me of a tree fallen in the forest.

A stunned silence filled the courtyard, a thick, heavy pressure swelling in the air.

My breath caught, and for a moment, I remained frozen, unable to believe what I was seeing.

The Alder King was dead.

And I had killed him.

A furious, hissed in-breath sounded behind me, and Faolan strode forward, his gaze fixed on the fallen king. For the first time, his careful composure crumbled away completely.

His cheeks flamed, his face contorted into a feral snarl. His knuckles were white as he clutched the ceremonial sword, the hilt gleaming in the sunlight.

His head snapped back to me. “Of course, you still fight for him,” he seethed, fury staining his every word as his eyes flicked between

Thorne and me. “I’ve no doubt Silvius was party to your deception, too. But it was futile,” he ranted. “Thorne didn’t win the Alder Trials. *I* did.”

Faolan took a swift step forward, drawing his sword in a smooth movement as he dropped onto one knee.

The blade gleamed as it swung upward, then down in a swift arc.

A crunch sounded as the sword met with the king’s neck, and my stomach turned.

Silvius’s head rolled across the dais, blood pooling around his body like poppies blooming over a field.

The image burned itself into the backs of my eyes, everything else dulling as the roaring sound returned to my ears, shock coursing down my arms and a tremble stealing over my body.

Faolan didn’t hesitate. Stepping neatly over the blood spreading over the floor, he wrenched the bone crown from the Alder King’s head and thumped it down upon his own. The disembodied whispers grew louder, filling my ears.

Were they coming from the crown?

Faolan spun, turning back to face the congregation of fae, his feet planted apart and a murderous expression on his face. “Silvius said this would not be a traditional ceremony,” he announced in a high, reedy voice, “and it turns out he was correct. But the end was the same.” He took a step forward, the sword still clutched in his hand, the blade slick and bright with the king’s blood. “I wear the Alder Crown. I took his head.”

“Faolan might have taken his head…” I found the words leaving my mouth before I’d even decided to say them. I took a stumbling step forward, my voice quivering. “But *I* took his life.”

Frantic mutters rose up around the courtyard, like a flock of birds taking flight, as the meaning of my words became clear to everyone present.

“I was entered into the Alder Trials against my will,” I cried out, gaining momentum. I took a step forward, away from Thorne. “But I survived them. Better—I *won* them.” With each word, I seemed to gain strength. It was as if this were inevitable. “You pitted me, a human girl, against not only Court Fae, but against the heirs to every Court in the Kingdom of Faerie.” I cast a steely glare around the courtyard. “And I outdid all of them.”

The itch returned to my fingers, the overwhelming desire to cast an enchantment sending shivers through my body. The weeds and plants that formed the throne seemed to strain toward me, as if reminding me that despite being surrounded by fae, I wasn’t powerless anymore.

“I demonstrated wisdom, and resilience, and magic, and I won the

Alder Trials," I repeated in a firm voice. "And then I killed the Alder King."

The frightened, furious chatter of voices grew louder, but I raised my own, half-shouting.

"By the rules and customs of Faerie, I'm your new Alder Queen," I yelled above the cacophony of sound that suddenly pooled into the courtyard.

I extended my arm, pointing one finger at Faolan. "This fae did not compete in the Alder Trials. He cannot say he won a single one of them. But he did proclaim throughout that there was nothing in the rules to say a human could not compete as a champion. I say, if a human can be a champion...if they can win...then they can *rule*."

Hard fingers fastened around my arm as Thorne stepped to my side.

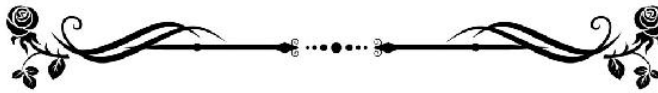
Relief rushed through me at his touch. I'd said my piece. And with Thorne beside me, backing me, my claim was stronger. He had finished second in the Alder Trials, had been a Prince of Faerie for centuries before I'd even been born.

His hand swept down my arm, his fingers lacing through mine, and I blew out a breath as his scent flowed over me.

I moved closer, feeling my shoulder bump against his chest as we stood side by side, facing the raucous sea of fae gathered before us.

And then, without warning, the world disappeared into shadow.

Chapter Thirty-Four



WE THUMPED down into a pile of soft, wet snow. The cold was a shock against my bare feet, icy water soaking up into my skirts. I blinked, staring around in confusion as the strong smell of pine smothered Thorne's scent. We were back in the forest.

The forest that surrounded the Sky Court, I realized—to our right, a tall stack of black rock cast a dark shadow over the trees, the top disappearing into a bank of gray cloud.

I yanked my hand from Thorne's and stumbled back, my breath once again coming too fast, puffing out in a sparkling mist that hung, frozen, in the air.

"Hollow hills, Aster, what was that?" Thorne's shoulders had set, black curls of shadow rising from them, framing his head like a dark halo. A muscle worked in his jaw as he glowered down at me.

"What was *that*?" I repeated in disbelief, a fire flickering to life in my chest. I took a step forward, sweeping back Faolan's cloak to plant my hands on my hips. "That was me claiming the Alder Crown. Because it didn't look like you were about to do anything to help."

He opened his mouth, but my words continued to spill out.

"Three days, Thorne. I sat in that festering cell for three days hoping you would come and find me—that you'd let me explain—that you'd do *something* to get me out of there."

His lips thinned. "Faolan said—"

"*Faolan said*," I repeated. "Listen to yourself. Why would you believe that folkdamned trickster over me?"

"What was I *supposed* to think, Aster?" Thorne exploded. "He told me, in simple terms—no wordplay or trickery—that you'd lied to me. I saw it for myself in the final Trial when you stopped me from killing the wyrm." His eyes shone. "You convinced me that I needed to win. You never said—never gave me any indication you were planning—" He broke off, running a hand through his hair and stalking back and forth.

Around him, the snow began to rise up in a glittering cloud.

I eyed it nervously. Frost Court magic, I guessed. I wrapped Faolan's cloak tightly around me, trying to shut out the cold.

Thorne shook his head. “And what you did… Do you have *any* idea what you just did?”

“Yes. I do,” I hissed. “I did what I had to for my people. I’m the only one who will fight to stop the Tithes.” Something clutched in my chest. “You *abandoned* me, Thorne. You left me in that cell to rot. I had to do something—I couldn’t let Faolan win—”

“You were the reason Faolan won in the first place!”

I clenched my fists. “But I never planned for him to take the crown.”

All the strength suddenly faded from my limbs. Cold wracked my body, making my teeth chatter. My bare feet were painfully numb as they pressed into the snow. Glancing between the trees, I settled my gaze on a fallen log and staggered over to it, sinking slowly down.

“You’re right that I wasn’t completely honest with you.” I took a breath, bunching my hands in Faolan’s cloak. Guilt curled in my stomach. “And I’m sorry I had to lie to you—that when I had to decide what to put first, I chose my people. But when it came down to it… When I saw that poisoned glass in your hand…” Tears suddenly blurred my vision. “Even if it meant losing the crown to Faolan, letting the Tithes continue… I couldn’t do it. Not if you were the cost.”

Silence rang out between us.

Tears poured freely down my cheeks as I lowered my gaze to my lap, picking at the loose thread of a golden sun embroidered into the cloak.

Then a hot body dropped onto the log beside me, two hands finding my shoulders and slinging a second, forest-green cloak around me.

I exhaled heavily. “I wasn’t *always* planning this,” I said, my words flowing faster. “I *did* think you deserved to win the crown. I wanted us to work together in the final Trial. But after we argued…”

Thorne tensed beside me. “I told you I wouldn’t immediately abolish the Tithes,” he said in a flat voice.

I sniffed, nodding my head. “It wasn’t…” I gave a short, sharp sigh. “It wasn't that we argued and I...turned against you. I swear it. I did think you would make a good king. I still do. But it made me realize…” I broke off, struggling to explain exactly what I’d felt. “What you said, about time moving differently for fae and humans… It’s true. And maybe you’re right that makes it hard for fae to change quickly. But it’s like you couldn't see how much harder it would be for things to change slowly, for humans. How many more lives lost. How many more humiliations at the hands of fae like Neve and Kage—being made to eat off the floor, to fight against your own kind, like an animal… It’s like you didn’t realize you were telling me nothing

would change in my lifetime."

Thorne's hand slid to the small of my back.

I drew in another breath. "I thought—I still think—things have to change. And when I knew you wouldn't do it, I realized that if I wanted to see change, I'd have to make it happen myself." I twisted to look at him. "But even then, Thorne, I promise... I didn't know I was going to do it right up until that very last moment."

His hand curled against my back, moving up to between my shoulder blades. "Aster...you should have let me win the final Trial."

I shook my head. "I needed to win, to prove humans could rule themselves. To make a legitimate claim for the Alder Crown within the rules of faerie magic." My voice turned more brittle. "In any case, it's done now. No matter what you say, I'm not going to change my mind. Humans need to be able to rule themselves. And I can make that happen. By faerie law, I should be queen."

Thorne shook his head slowly.

I turned to face him, frustration stirring again. "Why did you shadow me away? You saw me kill the king. You know my claim is true."

He blew out a breath. "Because...I'm not sure whether you *are* queen, Aster."

I paused, pursing my lips. "What do you mean?"

"I told you before that power passes down through the Alder Crown. I meant that very literally. The crown gives the new king or queen access to the power of all the kings and queens who've come before them." Thorne's gaze hardened. "What you did—killing the Alder King before Faolan could—it's never happened before. So it might be that the crown recognizes you as the new queen...or it might be that it still considers you Faolan's champion and so has accepted him as king. We don't even know if the crown would work for a human. And until we can be sure, it's too risky for us to stay. If it's accepted Faolan, even I would have no choice but to obey him. While he wears the Alder Crown, he could compel me to do anything… Make me hurt you."

I shuddered, fear walking down my spine as I remembered the whispers coming from the crown. Had Faolan heard them too? "So how do we find out whether the crown has accepted him?"

Thorne let out a soft sigh. "We wait. We send our spies to discover whether the other Court Fae have been compelled to bend the knee. But most importantly, we get far, far away from here."

My breath came lighter. I knew that Thorne wanted to protect me. But he didn't know I'd heard those whispers… "When I killed the king," I said hesitantly, "I started to hear...something. A kind of whispering… I think the crown *does* answer to me. Or at least it was

calling to me."

He turned sharply to look at me, his eyes narrowed. "But you don't *have* the Alder Crown, Aster. Faolan does. That means something to the other fae."

"But if we just took it—"

Thorne sighed again, and this time he sounded exasperated. "Aster, just because you heard those whispers, it doesn't mean Faolan hasn't heard them too. And even if the crown *isn't* working for him, it's too dangerous for us to stay here. A nominated champion has never tried to take the crown before, and if Faolan thinks that you've prevented the Alder Crown from accepting him, he'll kill you for it. And he's proved himself particularly adept at stealing you away from right under my nose." His hand moved reassuringly against my back even as the words stung.

"Not to mention, even if the crown is rightfully yours, none of the other Courts will welcome a human queen. You have no Court to back you, no experience in ruling. Just like you think it's not right for fae to rule humans, they're hardly going to be thrilled by the idea of a human ruling the fae. On top of that," he continued, his voice turning crisp, "since you used your magic in the final Trial, the enchanters' secret is out. Everyone will be reeling from that. They'll be mistrustful of my Court for hiding that secret and even more suspicious of humans than they were before. They won't want an enchantress as a queen—"

"And what about *us*?" I cut in.

He stared at me. "What?"

My shoulders set. "The only reason I want to become queen is to abolish the Tithes and allow humans to govern themselves. So what if I didn't rule alone? What if you ruled by my side?"

His mouth opened and closed.

"Has it ever been done?" I asked. "Human and fae kings and queens ruling alongside one another?"

A deep frown creased Thorne's forehead. "In myth," he said slowly. "In the old stories."

"Then it can happen again."

We both fell silent. For the first time since I'd killed the wyrm, the pain in my stomach eased. I had hated being at odds with Thorne, lying to him. We were so different, a fae and a human, a prince and an enchantress. But together, we were powerful.

"I'm sorry that I kept secrets from you," I murmured. "I'm used to working alone."

His warm hand found mine. "And I'm sorry for believing Faolan. I should have listened to the brownie and come and found you after the final Trial, trusted you enough to let you explain."

“Mosswhistle!” My heart lurched as I realized what I’d forgotten in all my scheming. “It helped me free the rest of the Sky Court servants—gave them the antidote I enchanted. It’s still in there…”

“Of course you couldn’t stop at just freeing your handmaids,” Thorne muttered. “But if that wily brownie was involved in this plan of yours, there’s no reason why it wouldn’t leave the Sky Court with the humans. I’m sure it’ll figure out where I’ve taken you.”

“Where you've taken me?” I repeated, my brow creasing. “You mean here?” I gestured to the snowy clearing.

A calculating look came over Thorne’s expression.

“To take the Alder Crown from Faolan,” he said slowly, “we would need allies to support your claim. Human *and* fae. To help us figure out whether the crown is working for him. To steal it from him, either way.”

I pressed my lips together, considering this.

A wicked smile danced across Thorne’s face. “You know, you proposing we rule as queen and king…” His eyes glittered. “There are simpler ways of asking me to be your husband.”

“I—my *husband*?” Heat prickled across my cheeks. I hadn’t even considered that when I’d asked him to rule alongside me as king. “Fae marry?” I tried to keep my voice light despite the thrill of the idea coursing through me.

Thorne had told me about fae mates, but I’d thought marriage was more of a human concept.

Thorne nodded. “Betrothals and marriages are common among the Court Fae. Especially royalty.”

My stomach somersaulted. “You know, in the human lands, it’s traditional for the male to ask the female for her hand in marriage.”

“I’m not human.” Thorne stood, then reached back to offer me his arm. “But I’ll bear that in mind.”

“And it usually involves expensive jewelry,” I added, eliciting a chuckle from him as he pulled me to my feet.

“Come on, Aster.” He squeezed my hand. “Let’s go home.”

“Home?”

His gaze met mine. “I think it’s time you finally meet the rest of the Forest Court…”

The End



Aster and Thorne’s story continues in book three: **A Promise of Thorns**.

Thanks for reading

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for reading *A Trial of Thorns*. We hope you've enjoyed the second instalment in Aster and Thorne's adventures as much as we enjoyed writing it! In the next book, *A Promise of Thorns*, you'll get to see more of the Kingdom of Faerie, as well as Aster fighting to take her place as Alder Queen.

And while *A Promise of Thorns* is the final book from Aster's point of view, the *A Court of Fairy Tales* series will continue with new fairy tale retellings and a few *very* familiar heroines…

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About the authors

Elm and Helena have been friends since before they were old enough to read. Their mothers were friends before that, and their grandmothers were friends before that.

Over the years, they've started a school magazine on literature, hosted Alan Rickman and Pirates of the Caribbean-themed sleepovers, run text-based RPG forums set in fantasy worlds, and co-founded a website about making more room for books in your life.

Some might say they were destined to end up writing together.

Today, having ended up living in the same city in Scotland, they're both still mad about books. They both love fairy tales, strong female leads, and hate-to-love romances, so these feature in all the stories they write. Recent fantasy books they haven't been able to stop chatting about include those by Sarah J. Maas, Holly Black, and Naomi Novik.

If you want to chat books or anything else with Elm or Helena, the best thing to do is to send one of them an email, or you social media butterflies can also connect with them online.

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